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Nov. 1944
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THE GUNS OF SQUAW VALLEY
A NEW NOVEL BY R. R. MEREDITH

This time you'll listen to ME, Sonny Boy!

1 **MOMMA WAS LOSING PATIENCE WITH ME AGAIN.** She says: "I'm getting plenty sick of you looking like Flaky Joe, Hair's Horrible Example! And I'm tired of you spending money for a lot of junk that doesn't help. You'd never listen to me who has been a nurse most of her life, *but you'll listen this time, Sonny Boy!*"

2 **"THIS PROVES WHAT I'VE TOLD YOU** for months," she went on. "You've got a case of infectious dandruff that ought to have repeated Listerine Antiseptic treatment and persistent massage. I've seen the records on the Lambert research, and I know what Listerine Antiseptic can do in killing the 'bottle bacillus.' And so, Baby, we're starting right now!"

3 **EVERY MORNING AND NIGHT SHE HERDED ME** into the bathroom and doused on Listerine Antiseptic. Then she followed it with a swell, vigorous massage. Boy! Did my scalp feel like a million. And the way those ugly flakes and scales began to disappear is nobody's business. What a treatment!

4 **"YOU'RE ALMOST HUMAN AGAIN,"** she said a few weeks after, "and your hair looks like it used to. After this, maybe you'll listen to Momma when she tells you that you ought to use Listerine Antiseptic, every time you wash your hair, as a precaution against the infection coming back." Will I listen? You said it!

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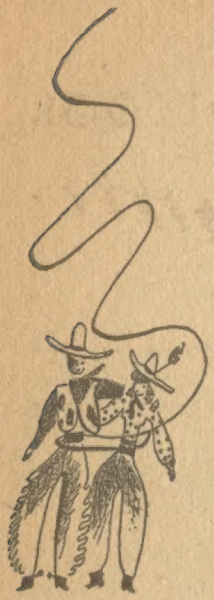

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THE GUNS

Ordinarily, the arrival of a woman on the stage would've thrown Skelton Pass into a chaos of excitement, but with her came the news of a cold-blooded killing and the fact that she was a woman was soon forgotten.

A Four-part Novel—Part I

by R. R. Meredith

OF SQUAW VALLEY

I.

MARCIA took a distinct dislike to the stagecoach's only other passenger. She was a little ashamed of herself because of it. He was polite enough and certainly not at all offensive in the way he looked at her.

Men had been staring at her ever since she left the train at Pecos Gulch. More and more she had

come to realize that the advice of her friends back in Chicago was not unfounded. This was a wild land, peopled by rough and hardened men, men who were hungry for the sight of a woman.

Once she had almost decided to turn back, and then she remembered that there was so little to turn back to. Nothing but a dusty hot school room filled with urchins in Chicago's poorer section, nothing to look forward to but endless, unromantic years of dull monotony.

Pecos Gulch, where she transferred to the stage, was less than a mile behind them before the man in the seat opposite told her his name. It was Henry Blaine. He was returning to his home in Skeleton Pass.

Marcia said, "How do you do?" primly, and a moment later, admitted that her own name was Marcia Clarendon.

Her companion smiled. He had even white teeth, accentuated by a clipped black mustache. His face was dark but not swarthy. He was, in fact, quite striking-looking. There was a dash about him, and Marcia decided it was this that had awakened her dislike. He was too smooth, too sure of himself, his clothes verging on the flashy.

"Visiting friends in Skeleton Pass, Miss Clarendon?"

"A friend of a relative," she told him. She wished that her natural reserve would thaw. Skeleton Pass was still five hours away. There were a thousand questions that she wanted to ask, and yet she could not bring herself to put them into words.

"Perhaps I know your relative's friend," Henry Blaine hinted.

"His name is Asa Langtree. Judge Asa Langtree."

"Ah, of course. Then you're Tom Markley's niece."

"Yes." Her brows went up. "How did you know?"

"The Pass is not a large place, Miss Clarendon. One man's business is another man's gossip."

Curiously, she resented that. She had heard that country people seldom had private lives of their own. She had the city dweller's resentment of intimacy with one's neighbors, and she found herself instinctively withdrawing from the casual conversation into which this handsome stranger had inveigled her.

"A fine man, the judge," Henry Blaine continued. "Lends dignity to our small community." He looked at her curiously. "You'll find your uncle's ranch, the Lucky 10, rather lonely for an Eastern girl."

Again she felt herself withdrawing. So he knew about that, too. He knew about Uncle Tom's death, and he probably knew about the deed to the Lucky 10 that she carried in her purse.

She was about to make a tart reply to his remark, when she heard a shot. It came from outside, and was followed by others. The stagecoach lurched as the horses leaped into their traces, and she heard the excited cry of the driver and the crack of his whip.

At first Marcia thought it was

some sort of a joke, an exciting episode staged, perhaps, for her entertainment by Judge Langtree.

Then she saw the expression on Henry Blaine's face, and the cold hand of fear closed about her heart.

Henry Blaine thrust his head through the coach window and withdrew it almost at once. There was a grim tightness about his mouth.

"We're in for it," he said. "If that crazy driver—"

Just then, there was a shrieking cry from the driver's seat. Almost at once, the stage began to slow down. Horsemen flashed by the window. She glimpsed a white horse with a masked man astride it. Then the stage stopped and another rider came up and thrust a masked face inside.

"All right, you two. Outside."

Henry Blaine put one hand on the doorknob, then looked at the girl. Every ounce of color had left her cheeks. She was trembling violently.

"Stay here," he told her. "I'll talk to them."

He got out and closed the door, and she could hear his low, even voice. There was a pause, then the door was jerked open, and the same masked face was staring at her.

"Gimme that," he said, and snatched the purse from her lap.

She was too frightened to protest, to speak. The face disappeared, and a moment later, the aperture was filled with Henry Blaine's figure as he returned to his seat.

Henry Blaine closed the stage door. A moment later, she heard the thunder of hoofs, receding in the distance. The coach lurched and started ahead.

"They got the shotgun guard," Blaine told her, and drove one fist into the palm of the other. "Killed him." He looked at the girl. "Were most of your valuables in that purse, Miss Clarendon?"

She nodded dumbly, too frightened to speak. Not only had the purse contained most of her pitifully small supply of money and jewels, but it had also contained the deed to Tom Markley's Lucky 10 Ranch. It was the only evidence she had that the property had been willed to her by her late uncle.

Johnny Saunders shaped his course to intercept the two stagecoach bandits. Attracted by the sound of shooting, he had ridden to the summit of the nearby ridge along the base of which he had been riding since morning.

He was too far away to be of any use by making his presence known. A much smarter move was to determine which direction the bandits would take, and then attempt to cut their trail.

The fact that there were two bandits, both of them heavily armed, didn't bother Johnny at all. He was used to odds. In fact, he reveled in them. When the odds were against you, it added spice to an adventure. It started the warm blood running through your veins, sharpened your thinking and made it possible for you to get a bang out of living.

Those were the only things Johnny Saunders cared about—excitement, adventure and dangerous living. He had inherited these qualities from a pioneer father.

Ben Saunders had been one of the first of that steady stream of adventurers who had begun trekking into the rich country of the West following the California gold discovery of '49.

It wasn't gold Ben Saunders had sought. It was land—land and an opportunity to make a home for himself and his motherless son.

Johnny was only ten when the Civil War broke out. They had built a cabin on the plains of the Middle West and staked themselves a homestead.

Ben Saunders fought the urge for adventure which he thought he had conquered for almost a year. Then one day he yielded to it. He left Johnny with a neighbor and headed East, to join the Union forces.

Two years later, official word came from Washington that Ben Saunders had been killed in the battle of Gettysburg.

Johnny remained with the neighbors until he was eighteen. The same urge for adventure that had governed his father's every action was a living flame in the boy's heart. Only with Johnny, there was no war to gratify that urge.

The cry now was, "Go West." Go West to the land of promise and adventure. And Johnny heeded the cry.

For three years he led a roaming, adventurous existence. He punched cattle and rode shotgun on a stagecoach line, and served as outriding scout for a pioneer train. He was twenty-three now, tall and fair-haired. He had long, flat muscles, laughing blue eyes and there was a wildness about him, a restlessness, an insatiable craving for excitement.

The Indian wars were over. Setlers and farmers, ranchers and miners, were beginning to people the vast territories of the West. Long caravans moved toward the setting sun, and detachments of the United States army moved with them, protecting their rights, bringing law and order, establishing a chain of posts that extended from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande, as far west as the Rockies, and beyond.

Johnny Saunders, playing a lone hand, eventually became listed as an army scout. The work only partially satisfied his craving for danger and excitement. For some unexplained reason, these qualities remained with him always.

Sometimes, sitting by his lonely campfire, troubled thoughts ran through his mind. What was it that he was seeking? What was it he wanted? Tomorrow's adventures? Tomorrow's dangers?

Always, these were the answers he gave to his questions, and always when the tomorrows came and went, when danger and excitement had been found and tasted, when there was another lonely campfire, he knew, deep down, that this was not the answer.

And so, at last, he had yielded to the inevitable. The answer, the

fulfillment, would never come. He must resign himself to it, satisfying as best he could that inner craving with the only medicine he knew and understood—wild living and danger.

Momentarily, Johnny had a twinge of conscience as he put Tonto, his white gelding, down through the heavy brush of the hillside. Yesterday, he had promised Captain Bob Talmage, commandant of the army post at Desert City, that this time he'd stick strictly to business.

"This is an important assignment, Johnny. It's doubly important to me because Jerry Yardman was my best friend."

The laughter had gone out of Johnny's blue eyes.

"I'm sorry about that, Bob. If Jerry's murderer is up in Squaw Valley, I'll bring him back. You know that."

"Sure. I know that, Johnny. But, look." Talmage had carefully laid down his pipe and folded his arms on the desk top. "I'm an army man, Johnny. Duty comes first. I've orders to find what man or gang of men is using the Lucky 10 brand as a dummy to foist diseased and inferior grades of cattle on the army. That's your purpose in going up into Squaw Valley. Everything else comes second."

"You're sure that this Tom Markley is dead?"

"No. All we know are the facts contained in the reports sent to us by the sheriff at Skeleton Pass. It seems there's been a good deal of rustling going on in the valley. Some of the smaller ranchers have been practically wiped out. One or two folded up and quit the country. That left their brands abandoned, but legally registered. Shortly afterward, inferior grades of cattle began to show up in shipments of so-called prime beef sold to the army at top prices. Investigation proved that all the culls were branded with the Diamond O mark. Naturally, our contract with the Diamond O was canceled.

"Things went along all right for a while, then more culls turned up. This time they were branded with the Star 80. So we investigated. We found that both these ranches were located in Squaw Valley and had been abandoned."

Johnny nodded thoughtfully. "So you figure that some rancher who is still in business is slapping these abandoned brands on his own culls and the culls he might steal. He shoves them in with his own good stock, and collects top prices for the lot. When investigations are made, there is no one around who claims ownership to the abandoned brands, and there's no way of proving that the culls were included in any particular shipment of prime stock."

"Exactly. It's a neat trick. We checked with our buyers, but when a buyer is constantly talking shipments of cattle, all of which are supposed to contain only prime beef, he can't tell which are going to include culls and which aren't. The best he can do is to cut out the culls when final checks are made.

report the brands with which they are marked."

"And the latest culls are marked with the Lucky 10 brand?"

"Yes. The report is that Tom Markley, the owner, had been losing so much of his stock by rustlers that he decided to fold up. Then one day he went out onto the range and didn't come back. Two weeks later, a body was brought in that was believed to be his. There was only a bruise on his skull to show how he'd died. He could have fallen from his horse and hit a rock. He could have been slugged. Anyway, Markley was declared legally dead despite the fact that his features had been so badly mangled by vultures as to render them almost unrecognizable.

"There would be no point in my sending troops up into the valley. The gang would only lay low till we got sick of hunting around. It's a one-man job, Johnny, and a dangerous one."

Johnny Saunders began to grin again. He leaned across the desk and shook Talmage's hand. Relief ran through the army officer in a warm wave. The problem had been a sore spot with him for weeks. It had made him grumpy and short-tempered. Washington had been on his ear for allowing those diseased cattle to come through. They had held him responsible. That's what made it tough.

Sometimes, Captain Talmage felt that he'd like to go to Washington and have a talk with those swivel-chair geniuses who sat in comfort and blithely dictated orders. He'd like to tell them a few things about the problems that confronted the commandant of a remote army post in the desert country.

But, of course, he never did. All Talmage's people had been army men, and he had learned to accept orders and dispatches with a philosophical outlook. He was an army man by choice. He hadn't gone into the thing blindly, and he knew what was expected of him and that there were ways of coping with all problems.

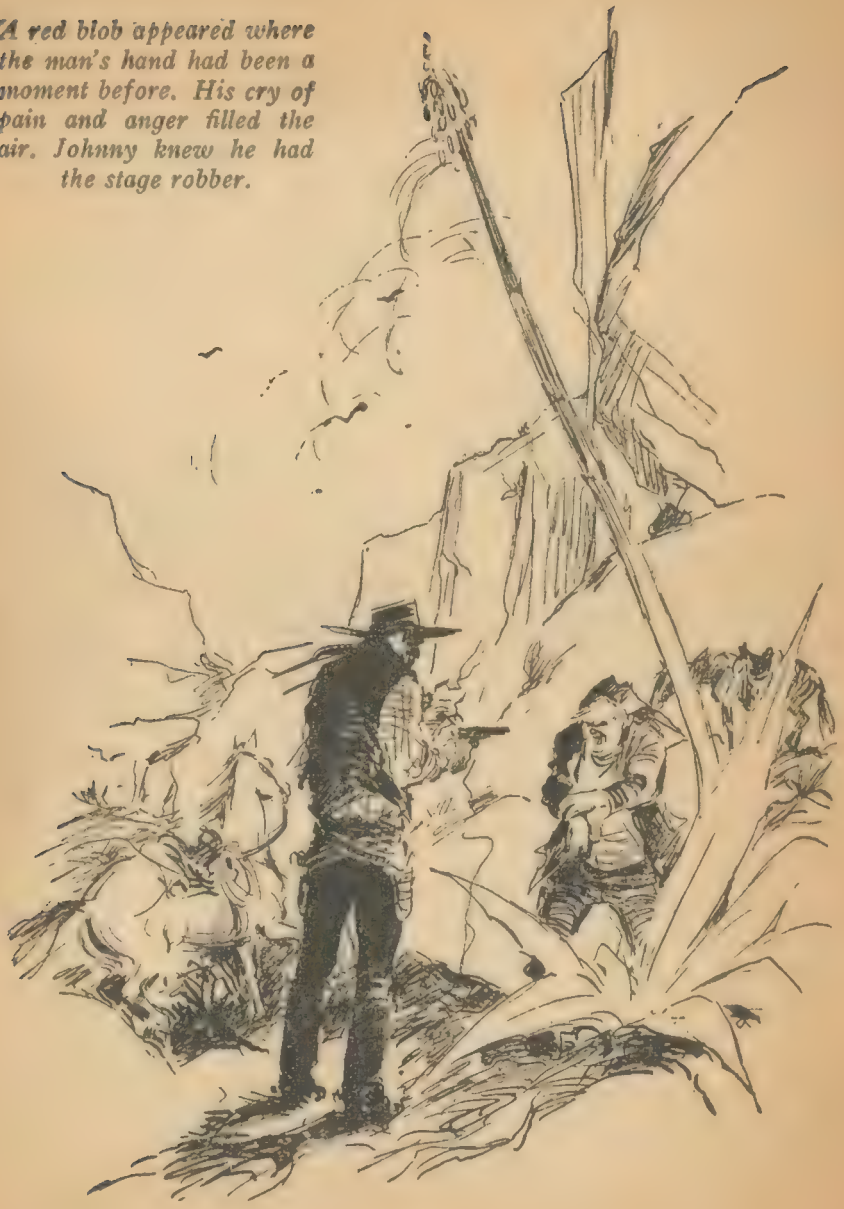
Johnny Saunders was one of those ways.

Johnny timed his descent of the brush-covered slope perfectly. He came out onto the trail along which the two bandits were riding split seconds after they had passed by.

Instantly, he flung a shot after the galloping figures. He chuckled to himself when they turned their now unmasked faces, then bent low over their mounts and drove home the spurs.

He knew what had flashed across their minds. They figured that he was one of a party, perhaps a sheriff's posse. It would never occur to them that one lone rider would attempt to capture two heavily armed, desperate stage robbers.

He was right. A few minutes later, the pair emerged into open country and separated. Johnny headed after the one on the white horse. From a corner of his eye, he watched the one on the sorrel disappear into the mouth of a canyon. An instant later, the one on



A red blob appeared where the man's hand had been a moment before. His cry of pain and anger filled the air. Johnny knew he had the stage robber.

the white horse also disappeared.

Without slackening speed, Johnny changed his course. He put his own mount up the slope to the rim of the canyon into which the sorrel horse bandit had vanished.

Thick brush grew along the rim. Johnny slowed his pace and moved along the canyon rim, keeping himself screened from below by the brush. After a while he dismounted, moved to the lip of the rim and looked down.

Almost directly beneath him was the sorrel horse. Standing beside it was the bandit. He was poking through the contents of what appeared to be a woman's purse.

Johnny began creeping down the sharp slope of the canyon wall. When he reached the bottom he smelled smoke. He moved forward and saw that the bandit was holding a long, legal-looking envelope in his hand, to which he had set fire.

Johnny scowled. This was a new one. What the devil could be in that envelope that was so important that it had to be burned at once?

Johnny slid his six-gun from its holster and pulled back the hammer. He stood erect and stepped out into the open.

"I'll take that!" he said.

The bandit's head came up with a startled jerk. His mouth fell open and his eyes bulged. It was plain that this was the last thing that he expected to happen.

For a moment the scene was like a tableau. Blue smoke trailed upward from the burning envelope in the bandit's hand. Flames licked toward the man's fingers, and suddenly he swore and dropped the envelope.

Curiously, that was the last thing Johnny expected to happen. For just a second it threw his mind into confusion. And so it was that he wasn't quite prepared for the next development.

The burning envelope had barely reached the ground before the bandit's hand had streaked to the gun at his hip. The man threw himself sidewise as he drew and fired.

Johnny felt the bullet tug at the sleeve of his shirt, and in that split second, a wave of anger and self-condemnation sprang to life inside of him for having allowed this thing to happen.

Then he had dropped to one knee. The gun in his hand bucked and roared. He heard the bandit shriek, and saw the man's smoking gun go spining away.

Johnny's finger had contracted on the trigger for a second shot, but he released the pressure. There was no need. A red blob had appeared where the man's hand had been a moment before. His screaming cry of pain and anger filled the air.

Ignoring that torrent of sound, Johnny stepped forward and crushed out the flame that was still licking at the burning envelope. He scooped up what was left of the paper and spread it out. He saw at once from what remained of the printing that it was a deed to a

ranch. Then his eyes opened wide and a low whistle escaped his lips.

He saw the words "Lucky 10." And beneath that he read the name Marcia. He scowled. Marcia! That was a girl's name. Good gosh, had Bob Talmage sent him up here to arrest a girl?

The thought was at once funny and deflating. A man seeking excitement and dangerous living didn't find it by running down a woman.

Or that's what Johnny Saunders thought.

II.

Marcia had to admit that she was grateful to Henry Blaine for staying close to her after the stagecoach reached Skeleton Pass. Otherwise, she might have been trampled underfoot.

Ordinarily, the arrival of a woman on the stage would have created enough excitement in itself to bring half the town tumbling outside to stare, speculate and wonder. Today, the advent of a woman into this remote frontier town, even a woman with coppery-colored hair, wide gray eyes and a figure the grace of which couldn't be concealed even by the voluminous skirts of her fashionable Chicago gown, was of secondary importance.

Bill Anderson, the shotgun guard, had been shot and killed. Not alone was this fact enough to stir up the wrath of the townspeople. Added to it were the facts that Bill was one of Skeleton Pass' best-liked citizens, plus the fact that he was one of the four other men in the vicinity who had suffered a like fate, and none of the murders had been avenged.

These things Marcia gleaned from the excited conversation she heard as she stood close by the protecting side of Henry Blaine, hemmed in on all sides by the press of Skeleton Pass' citizenry. In vain, she looked around for sight of a man who might answer to the description of Judge Langtree as provided her by Henry Blaine.

All the men within her range of vision, and they outnumbered the women ten to one, were roughly dressed, hardened, loud-talking, and most of them bearded.

Without exception they wore guns. Some of them drew their weapons, brandished them in the air, and one or two shot them off. All the while excited voices were shouting dire threats, demanding that a posse be formed and the varmint who shot good old Bill be strung up to the nearest cottonwood tree.

And so, cringing, frightened and unnoticed, Marcia remained by the side of Henry Blaine, and wished over and over again that she were back teaching the three R's to her class of Chicago urchins.

She knew from the manner in which Henry Blaine was addressed and the fact that at all times he was the center of attention, that he was an important figure. When a momentary hush fell over the crowd and it parted to allow a tall, heavy-set, mustached individual with a five-pointed star pinned to his shirt, it was to Henry Blaine

that the officer addressed his words.

"Trouble, Mr. Blaine? What happened?"

Henry Blaine repeated what had happened. He spoke in his customary low, even tones. And when he had finished he added, "Those bandits can't be so far away, sheriff. One of them was riding a white horse. This mob is demanding action. I think perhaps you'd better form a posse and—"

And it was just at that moment that someone on the outskirts of the crowd shouted, "Hey! Look!"

Coming down the street were two horsemen. One of them was riding a white horse. The other was astride a sorrel. The latter was riding ahead. He held his hand in an awkward position, and everyone could see that it was bulky with a bandage.

No one moved or spoke as the approaching pair came on and drew up. Johnny Saunders sat easily in his saddle and looked down at the sea of upturned faces. He didn't like some of the expressions that he saw, but he could guess how they felt. When a stagecoach is held up and a man shot, you can't expect a bunch of people to look exactly happy.

He was glad that he could turn at least one of the bandits over to the sheriff. It would give him a good start in this town, and that's what he needed if he was going to accomplish his purpose.

Johnny started to speak, and then he stopped short. His glance had fallen on the girl. At first he couldn't believe his eyes. And he couldn't understand the strange sensation that ran through him at the mere sight of her.

For what seemed like minutes, he sat absolutely motionless in his saddle, his eyes open wide, a half-smile on his lips.

It didn't occur to him as strange that she was returning his look with almost the same expression as was on his own face. It didn't seem strange, bold or extraordinary that the shadow of a smile touched her lips, and she inclined her head in a barely perceptible fashion, almost as if she were speaking to him.

It was as if this were planned, this meeting, as if it were part of a preordained destiny. He didn't stop to analyze it. Perhaps if he had, his more practical self—the self that he knew, understood and had lived with for twenty-three years—would have made the feelings he was experiencing at the moment seem ridiculous. Perhaps he would have been ashamed and embarrassed, because these sensations were not for men who lived according to the code of recklessness and danger.

But Johnny did not stop to think or reason. All he knew was that for the first time in his life it seemed that he had reached the end of his goal, that all the craving and vague dissatisfactions were gratified. He was possessed of an urge to move forward, to go up to this girl, to speak to her, to touch her.

The urge was so strong that, unknowingly, he had actually started forward. His horse took one step

and stopped, and he became conscious that someone had seized the animal's bridle rein.

A growing murmer of voices penetrated his consciousness. The sea of upturned faces swam before his vision and steadied, and he saw that he was the object of a dozen pairs of colding accusing eyes.

He shifted in his saddle, faintly resentful of the fact that the spell had been broken. His eyes came to rest on the five-pointed star on the chest of the man with the mustache. He nodded shortly.

"Here's a prisoner for you, sheriff. One of the pair that held up the stage. Sorry I let the other get away."

No one spoke or moved. Sheriff Tucker looked at him soberly, then slid his glance to Henry Blaine.

Blaine was smiling, a cold, silky smile.

"Pretty slick," he murmured. He glanced toward the stage driver. "How about it, Ray? What would you say?"

Ray Butler, the driver, spat out a stream of tobacco juice and kept his steady, contemptuous eyes fixed on Johnny.

"I'd say the guy packs more nerve than a buffalo has whiskers. Cripes! The gall of him! Didn't even bother to change horses. And that guy on the sorrel—"

It took Johnny a full minute to grasp what was happening. Anger swept through him.

"Why, you crazy fools! Would I be idiot enough to come riding into town open-handed if I'd held up the stage? You dumb clucks!"

"You would," said Sheriff Tucker, "if you had the nerve, which it looks to me like you got." He inclined his head toward the man on the sorrel. "A nice little trick. Your pardner here got clipped and needs the attention of a doctor, so you cook up this scheme—"

"Why, you—" began Johnny, and then he laughed. Cripes! Of all the dumbheads he'd ever seen. He reached into his pocket and took out the half-burned deed to the Lucky 10 Ranch he'd taken from the bandit. He tossed it contemptuously into the crowd.

"Take a look at that. I found this ranny here burning it. He'd taken it out of a lady's handbag. What the devil would I be wanting that for? If I were going to hold up a stage I'd come away with something better than that."

But the play didn't impress his accusers. One of them picked up the deed, glanced at it indifferently, returned his gaze to Johnny.

Johnny knew what was coming. He could feel it. He could see it on the sullen, revenge-hungry faces of the men who had formed in a circle around him.

But he wasn't prepared for what happened in the next moment.

Henry Blaine, who had been staring at him intently, suddenly looked down at the girl beside him and saw that her gaze was fixed on the man on the sorrel.

Blaine looked up at Johnny again.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Let's not jump to conclusions, folks.

There have been too many killings around here. We don't want to lynch the wrong man." He swung his gaze downward again. "What would you say, Miss Clarendon? You were in the stage. Do you recognize these men?"

Marcia turned wide, frightened eyes up at Henry Blaine. She did recognize one of them. The man on the sorrel had been the one who had thrust his face inside the coach and snatched her purse. She was positive of that. He had a little scar, a curious sort of heart-shaped scar on his forehead just above his left eye. Yes, she was sure he was the same man.

And she knew that one of the other bandits had been riding a white horse. She was sure of that, too. She had seen the white horse through the coach window.

Yet, for a moment, she didn't speak. She couldn't. Her throat felt dry and there was a queer sensation tugging at her heart. She couldn't explain it. All she knew was that the sensation had begun when she first looked into the eyes of the man on the white horse. It wasn't natural or real. It was frightening.

And then she heard her own voice, strange and far-away-sounding.

"Yes," she replied, "I do recognize one of them. That man on the sorrel horse. He was the one who reached in and took my purse. I remember very well because—"

Her further words were drowned by sound, by movement. Someone yelled, "Let's get 'em!" And there was a surging forward. There were wild cries, the sound of a shot, and then chaos.

Johnny Saunders was used to acting on impulse. Quick, instinctive action had gotten him out of more than one tight place. Later, he would think the thing out.

Right now was the time for action.

A pair of hands reached up for him, and he slashed downward with his bunched fist and felt the stinging pain of the impact as the blow caught his assailant glancingly on the side of the head.

The reaching hands went limp. Two men were on the other side of him, and Johnny whirled his horse viciously and knocked them both off balance.

Then Johnny's gun was out. He sent two shots crashing into the crowd. With his left hand, he pulled Tonto back on his haunches. For seconds, the animal's sharp-edged hoofs were flaying the air above the milling crowd.

The mob scattered like leaves before a sudden gust of wind. In split seconds, the space in the immediate vicinity of Johnny and his plunging horse was empty.

Johnny laughed. It was a wild, reckless laugh born of sudden danger, of excitement. It was the laugh of the young, daring Johnny Saunders who had made a name for himself throughout the territory.

Tonto's hoofs came back to earth, and Johnny sent the animal plunging straight at a knot of men who had retreated a dozen yards down the street and had turned, clawing

at their guns. Horse and rider went through them like a streak of white light. They were jostled, scattered, tumbled to the ground.

Moments later, Johnny rounded a corner of the Jackpot Saloon. He bent low over Tonto's neck, spoke softly into the animal's ear. And the great beast put its belly to the ground and headed for the hills.

A dozen men raced to the saloon corner and shot aimlessly in the direction taken by the fugitive. Back at the stagecoach, Sheriff Tucker was yelling at his men, ordering them to their horses, trying to deputize them all in the same breath.

Henry Blaine had withdrawn to the veranda of the Frontier Hotel, before which the stagecoach had stopped, and drawn Marcia Clarendon with him. But it wasn't until Tucker had at last got his posse organized and mounted, and they had thundered out of town, that he remembered the girl.

He turned to look at her, half expecting that she would have fainted. Instead, she was staring up the street at the retreating backs of the posse. A flush had come into her cheeks. Her gray eyes were open and alive.

Henry Blaine cocked his head to one side, frowning, listening to the words that came from the girl's slightly parted lips.

"Oh, I hope they don't catch him," she was saying. "Oh, please don't let them catch him!"

Two miles out of town, Johnny Saunders found a creek with water in it. He put Tonto down into the creek bed and followed the water north for five miles. Then he cut east across a rolling plains country, allowing the animal to set its own pace, knowing there was not another horse in the territory that could catch him.

Toward midafternoon he drew rein atop a low hill, dismounted, loosened his saddle cinch and sat down, fishing for the makings.

An hour before sunset he saw a reddish cloud of dust moving across the plain. A half-hour later the dust cloud turned south and vanished.

Johnny chuckled to himself. "Couldn't take it," he mused. "Ran themselves ragged trying to pick up my trail."

And then, for a time, he forgot about the posse. He built a tiny fire, cooked himself some bacon and made up a batter of sourdough biscuits. Afterward, he threw dirt on the fire and sat hunkered down, smoking one cigarette after another, watching the white stars come out one by one.

Strange thoughts and forebodings ran through him. A soft wind came down off the hills and washed against his face.

He rose at last and stood for long moments, staring off toward the town of Skeleton Pass. He would be a fool to go back there. Tomorrow the posse would form again and set out on his trail in deadly earnest. He would be smart to put as many miles between himself and the town as he could.

But the soft, warm face of the girl projected itself in his mind. He swore. What part did she have in this business that had brought him up into Squaw Valley? The deed had said that she was the owner of the Lucky 10 Ranch, the brand of which had been found on the diseased cattle. That meant that Tom Markley was really dead.

His frown deepened. The stage-coach holdup was for a purpose other than stealing valuables. Someone feared the existence of that deed. Someone who knew of the girl's coming and wanted the deed destroyed. Why? The answer was simple. If Lucky 10 Ranch were occupied, the man or group of men who were using the abandoned brand, would have to discontinue the practice.

Johnny mounted and rode slowly south. He kept telling himself that he was returning to Skeleton Pass because there lay the answer to the riddle that had brought him up into Squaw Valley.

But he knew that wasn't the reason. He knew the reason was a girl with coppery-colored hair and gray eyes, the knowledge of whose mere existence gave fulfillment to his life.

TO BE CONTINUED.

* * * * * * * * *

WHEN SUMMER WANES

When summer wanes, and roses die,
And southward flights of birds wing by,
I shall not mourn the vanished days
Of sunny skies and woodland ways.

The crisping frost, the falling leaves,
The stubbled fields and harvest sheaves,
Will mean fulfillment of desire,
You here to share the first hearth fire.

GERTRUDE HAHN.

PRAIRIE FLOWER

by Lytle Shannon

That's what he likened Amber to—a flower—but Amber's pappy added him up to a snake in the grass, and the two don't mix.

It was a roaring night in Yellowknife, raw desert hill town of southern Arizona. In the Jamboree Hotel lights blazed, fiddles scraped and screamed, gay airs to which red-shirted miners and lean range riders stamped their feet, shouted and laughed, swung their pretty partners till the room was a flutter of roses and ribbons.

Lovely Amber Reddon, amber-haired, amber-eyed, dancing like a leaf in the wind, drew men like flies. She was looking her prettiest tonight in a sunburst gown that fell about her like the petals of a golden flower. Dancing past a group of men, her father's angry words came to her, clouding her sparkling radiance:

"Just let that Wilde Ritchie try hornin' in on my freightin' and I'll wreck his wagons, every damned one of 'em!"

"I hear he's on the road," a voice retorted. "Rates is cheaper—"

Amber did not catch her father's reply. But her momentary annoy-

ance passed. No doubt those men were only teasing her father. He had held the freighting on this road for so long that the very hint of rivalry threw him into a rage. There was probably nothing to it. She flung herself into the merriment again.

A madcap spirit swept the crowd, venting itself in pranks, tricks. Men snatched each other's partners, swung them off their feet, tossed them up, held them daringly high. Lights went on and off, shrieks of laughter shook the room. Hands grasped eagerly for Amber. Quick as a darting hummingbird she eluded them, laughing, tantalizing them with her very elusiveness.

Abruptly, she was swept into arms that closed around her with such masterly possessiveness that she glanced up, startled. A stranger to her, young, lean and tanned, with daring blue eyes and a mop of unruly hair the color of red-gold autumn leaves. Their glances met, clung for a disturbing moment. He smiled down at her, and there flashed through her a sense of heady attractiveness, of strength that was a combination of fire, ice and steel.

They floated into a lilting, luring waltz that was like a sigh of love from the fiddler's fingers. They did not speak. What need of words with this wild, sweet enchantment enfolding them like a caress? The mad revelry swirling about them might have been miles and miles away.

Abruptly, the lights went down. Wild shouts, howls of delight, shook the room. Startled, Amber was thrown toward her partner. She felt him tremble, his arms closing tighter about her, crushing her to him. Slowly, as if drawn by some magnet, her face turned upward. Then, as if control had slipped, his lips came down on hers with a fierce pressure that sent singing tides of excitement through her. He held her close till it was as if life swirled a singing cloud about them.

"You're like one of our own prairie flowers," he whispered, his lips touching her hair.

Abruptly, the lights flashed on again, the noisy revelry surging up in shouts and laughter. Only a moment, then tantalizingly, the music crashed to a close.

"Well, Wilde Ritchie, how soon you going to shove us off the road with your cheap wagons?" demanded a sneering voice.

Amber glanced up to see Thorne, her father's driver, swaggering beside them.

"Who said I was going to shove you off?" demanded her partner.

But she was staring up at him, startled, breathless. The walls spun about her, the faces in the room tipped crazily. She took a step backward, her gleaming head high.

"Wilde Ritchie?" she demanded, her voice a splintering icicle.

He nodded, meeting her stare with answering coolness.

"I am Amber Reddon, John Reddon's daughter," she informed him haughtily.

"Glad to make your acquaintance." He smiled, bowing and add-

ing rather quizzically, "Though it seems a little late for formalities."

Something in his blue eyes, something bantering and teasing, made her cheeks tingle and burn.

"So it's you that's putting on your cheap outfits, trying to ruin us, my father's business!" she accused him scornfully.

"I'm not trying to ruin anybody," returned the young man, his voice cool and controlled. "The road's free to anybody that wants to put wagons on it, isn't it? There's business enough for two freighting lines, two properly run lines. From what I hear, there'll be more than enough. Times are picking up."

"You're trying to drive us off the road," Amber persisted. "You've gone behind my father's back offering cheaper rates. But you'll never do it! It's us'll drive you off the road, you . . . you cheat!"

The eyes of the young man flashed and he seized her wrist.

"I'm no cheat!" he retorted. "I go behind nobody's back!"

"Hands off!" shouted Thorne, his fist shooting out.

But Wilde Ritchie's own fist shot out, and he struck the way lightning strikes. Thorne went crashing to the floor. At the thud off that fall, hell let loose in the room. This was just what the rowdy crowd wanted, the excuse for a lusty, roaring brawl. With howls of rage and delight, Thorne's friends sprang at Ritchie. He met the avalanche head on, striking out with fists and feet. In three seconds he was fighting like a trumpeting bull surrounded by a pack of yapping wolves.

Against a wall, cut off from escape by a boiling mass of fighting men, Amber stood rigid, terrified. Backed into a corner, Ritchie was fighting with the skill, the power, of a dozen men. As she watched, scarcely breathing, a thrill shot through her. She wouldn't have believed that he could stand alone against that mob.

But here came a fresh squad charging upon him. A knife gleamed in the hands of one, flashed above Ritchie's head. She screamed, started toward him. He dodged, leaped for the man, flung him like a log into the snarling faces of his comrades. The bunch went sprawling backward. Howling, cursing, they were up and at him again.

Again and again he met them, towering, powerful, laughing in savage glee, hurling man after man from him as if they were so many sticks. It seemed but a moment till he had them all at bay, a heaving, bleeding pack. And there were men behind him now, drawn no doubt by the controversy over the freighting. Amber saw her father stride up to face the young man.

"Wilde Ritchie, the man that's going to take over the road, eh?" he greeted the stranger sneeringly.

"I hadn't thought of taking over the road, yet," retorted Ritchie, wiping blood from his face.

"Don't try to get smart with me," warned Reddon. "I've freighted on this road since before you were born."

"What if you have?" challenged the other.

"What if I have?" echoed the old man. "Just this. I'll have none o' your sneakin' in and undercharging me. I'll drive you off the road, you and your cheap outfits. I'll shoot up every damned one of 'em. I'll—"

"We'll see if you will," Ritchie flung back at him. "You don't own the road, even if you have had things your own way all these years. Of course, you don't want competition, lowered rates. I tell you it's your overcharging that's kept the country back. You've bled the poor devils dry that's trying to make a living along the road!"

"You lie! You lie!" frothed the old man.

The room went suddenly still, so still that Amber felt a shiver run down her spine. It seemed an eternity till she heard Ritchie's voice, cold, hard:

"It's only your gray hairs that keep you from eating your words."

"You lie! Tell you to your face you lie!" shouted Reddon, brandishing his fist. "I haven't overcharged. I've give good honest service on this road. I do things in the open. I—"

"Listen," commanded Ritchie, thrusting the fist aside as if it had been an annoying fly. "I'm here tonight to see if we can't agree on a rate for freight, on a time schedule, too. The way the road is, all those danger spots, we ought to—"

"To hell with you and your rates!" shouted Reddon, his face an apoplectic red. "I'll charge what I damn please, and I'll freight when I damn please. I'll have no dealings with a crook!"

"All right," retorted Ritchie, moving toward the door.

"And if you know what's good for you, you'll stay off the road with your cheap wagons," advised Thorne, from the safety of the crowd.

But the other, swinging upon him, flung a scornful laugh in his face, and strode out.

The moment he was out of the room talk surged loudly, swaggeringly:

"We'd ought to ha' made mince meat o' the young pup!"

"Put him down and tromped on him, cocky young devil!"

"I ought to've knocked hell outta him!" declared Thorne loudly.

Amber swung upon him scornfully.

"Yes, why didn't you?" she demanded mockingly, and turning, walked out the door.

She crossed the street to her home, rooms behind the tumbledown office of the Reddon Freighting Co. In her own room she struck a light, threw herself into a chair. Her brain was in a whirl. Suddenly, she turned to the mirror, gazed at her reflection there.

"You're like one of our own prairie flowers!"

Waves of color swirled stingingly over face and neck, a sudden swift heat pulsed in her veins. Angrily, she swung away.

"I hate him, hate him!" she whispered, her hands clenched hard. "Oh, why was I such a fool tonight? A fool, a traitor to my own father, that's what I was!"

What would her father do if he

knew? What he would do if this young fool persisted, defied him, put his freight wagons on the road? There would be trouble. There was certain to be trouble unless they agreed on a time schedule. The road, winding through steep, rocky hills from San Roebles south to St. Croix at the northern end, was full of danger spots.

There were turns, short sharp turns with barely room for two wagons to pass, to go over which meant a drop of hundreds of feet to bristling rock below. There were long, steep grades without a single turnout wide enough for another wagon to pass, there was dangerous trestle work— She shuddered. Yes, there was bound to be trouble.

Her father, with Thorne as right-hand man, had absolute control of the freighting on the road, rates, time schedule, everything. In fact, they freighted as it suited them, in a hit-and-miss sort of way, laying off when weather conditions weren't favorable, when orders didn't seem to warrant the expense of a trip up or down the road. Times had been dull, the cattle and sheep ranches barely carrying on, many of the mines abandoned or dead. What did Ritchie expect to do under such conditions? All he would get out of it would be trouble. Thorne would see to that.

Amber bit her lip, frowned. If only her father had never got in with Thorne. He had hired him as a driver, but the man had practically ruled him the several years he had been with him. Amber knew Thorne for what he was, a gambler, a cardsharper. He didn't care about the freight business really, probably used it as a cloak to cover certain shady dealings. All that kept him at the job was his pride in the way he could "handle the ribbons." As a driver, he had no rival in the country. If he and Ritchie should meet on one of those dangerous spots— At the thought, a cold wave went over her. She checked the feeling angrily. Let the young fool keep off the road with his cheap wagons! She hated him! She would never think of him again!

But she had reckoned without her wayward, impulsive heart. It was stronger than any resolve she could make. Nights she awoke from dreams of a gallant young figure who laughed scornfully at his puny enemies. But in quiet moments there came memories of steel-strong arms, of a kiss that was a torment, yet a torment that was rapture.

She fought those feelings guiltily. She threw herself into the work of tidying the dingy office, urging her father and Thorne to clean and brighten old harnesses, to renovate old wagons, have them in readiness to compete with Ritchie on the road. But they only laughed at her.

"Ain't enough business to meet the expense of a trip to San Roebles," declared Thorne. "Got to wait for more orders. As for that young smarty, we ain't heard another word o' him."

"Reckon we scared him off," chuckled Reddon.

But Amber was far from feeling so confident. There had been some-

thing in Wilde Ritchie's attitude that kept her on the alert, something that warned her that she would see him again. Then, one afternoon, standing in the doorway of the office, there came to her the clear sound of silvery bells. All in a minute, it seemed that the whole town was out in the streets, listening, watching down the road from where the sound came.

Steadily, the silver clangor of bells grew louder, clearer. Then around the turn below Yellowknife swung a gayly decked team and covered wagon, a team such as the town had never seen. Twelve horses, fine spanking animals in shining harness decked with rings and tassels, the two golden bay leaders each bearing proudly a clear-toned, silvery bell. And high on the wagon seat perched Wilde Ritchie, holding the reins with masterly skill, swinging his team up the main street of the town.

For the first few moments the crowd could only stare. But when the young driver smiled and doffed his sombrero to them, somebody started a cheer. It rolled down the street, gathering volume as it went, till it swelled to a roar. To that ringing acclaim Wilde Ritchie drew up before the Jamboree Hotel, swung down from the high seat. In the excitement of the moment, Amber found herself out on the street, jostled by the crowd.

A divided crowd, she realized instinctively. Some fairly mobbed the young freighter, shaking him by the hand, slapping him on the back. These hailed him as a godsend, for he had brought up supplies badly needed by stores, hotels and ranches. But there were others who glowered in the background, muttering threats, making insulting remarks about Ritchie's turnout.

In the midst of the excitement, Amber saw her father standing in the doorway of their freight sheds. He looked old, dazed and defeated. Stabbed by compunction, she rushed to him, threw her arms about him.

"Don't worry, dad. Don't mind," she choked. "We'll fix up our wagons and teams, get them right on the road. We'll show him! We'll—"

"We'll blast him to hell, him and his fine team!" snarled Thorne, tramping up.

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" retorted Amber hotly. "If you'd been ready— I warned and warned you!"

"He's a sneak, comin' in and underchargin' us," declared Thorne, stamping into the freight sheds.

Amber shut herself in the office, sat down at the worn desk. She couldn't bear to watch that jubilant unloading over there. Every note of laughter rang derisive triumph in her ears. She opened the desk, took out a ledger and letters, glanced over the orders they had booked. She realized sickeningly that most of these orders were void now, had been filled by Ritchie. By this very first trip up the road he had dealt the Reddon Freighting Co. a disastrous blow.

Late that night, alone in the office where she was trying to salvage a few orders from the wreck, she

heard a tap at the door. Opening it, she stood face to face with Wilde Ritchie. For a dizzy moment she was conscious only of his nearness, of the sudden throbbing in her veins.

"What do you want?" she demanded coldly.

"I wanted to see you," he returned softly, and stepping in, he closed the door behind him.

Something in his eyes sent a quivering gladness racing through her. But the next moment the memory of all he had done to them filled her with hatred.

"How have you got the nerve to come here?" she flashed, backing away. "I hope you're satisfied with the way you've robbed us of our business, undercharging, stealing orders—"

"You know that isn't true," he returned quietly. "What business I got was by fair means. Men down in San Roebles begged me to take stuff up, stuff hotels and stores along the road had been waiting weeks for. I could have loaded another wagon easily, but for a first trip I thought— In fact, this trip is just to look things over, to—"

"Oh, don't try to make excuses, to cover up what you've done with fine words!" she retorted bitterly.

"I came to see if we couldn't get together on this," he stated, with a vague motion toward the road. "As I said before, I'm willing to meet your father halfway about—"

"Oh, you are!" she broke in. "Well, as my father told you before, we want no dealings with you, and that's final!"

"I'm thinking of your side of it as much as my own," he went on patiently.

"Very kind of you," she returned, her voice sharp with sarcasm, "but we've run our business all these years without any help from you."

"This is a dangerous road to drive," Ritchie went on, as if he had not heard. "We ought to come to some arrangement as to time schedule in order to avoid accidents."

"We'll freight when we please, as we've always done," she retorted defiantly.

"All right."

He made a movement toward the door, then hesitated. Was he weakening? With a flash of triumph she went on:

"You're crazy, trying to fight us. Thorne, our driver, knows the road from one end to the other. If there are accidents, if you should go crashing over a cliff—" She stopped, shuddering at the picture her words called up.

"Well, suppose I do?" he asked lightly. "You wouldn't care."

His eyes held a quizzical, challenging light. Suddenly she writhed, feeling that he was looking into her heart, laughing inwardly in triumph.

"No, I wouldn't care!" she cried, her amber head high. "It would serve you right, you . . . you underhanded—"

She caught the flash of steel points in his eyes. His hand shot out, closed on her wrist with a grip of iron. She gazed back at him with

sheer defiance and hatred.

Abruptly her eyes faltered, and a quivering seized her. She wanted, suddenly, to be taken in his arms, held against that strong shoulder, to feel again his lips on hers. She closed her eyes. For, miraculously, she knew it was going to happen!

Then his arms were stealing about her, and he was drawing her to him. Her strength was drained from her. There was nothing in life but those arms, those eyes filled with tenderness.

"Amber, lovely Amber," he whispered. "It's worth fighting you to have you like this! Darling, you're mine! I'll never let you go! I'll kidnap you, carry you off!"

"You . . . you wouldn't dare!" she gasped, but something wild and sweet shot through her.

"Wouldn't I? I'd dare anything to get you—anything!" he declared huskily.

Suddenly, he was crushing her to him again, and wild, sweet emotion flowed through her. She clung to him, her lips responding to his. She knew now how she had longed for his kisses all during these dragging days.

Clear through the night rang the clangor of bells. His arms dropped from her, and he swung to the door.

"My team!" he cried. "Somebody's—"

Then he was gone without a farewell glance. She stood where he had left her, hearing only the sound of his hurrying steps. Voices came to her, voices raised in anger. Then the sound of bells moving up the road, growing dimmer, dimmer, till they were lost in the night. She shivered, looked dazedly about her. Had it all been a dream?

She dropped into a chair at the desk, buried her face in her arms. Memories overpowering, sweet, treacherous, swept her like a storm. At times she was utterly still, again she beat her fists upon the desk while angry thoughts shook her. In the end came quivering humiliation. Her heart had betrayed her, shown him that she loved him. She, a Reddon, daughter of the man he virtually had ruined! To him, all this tonight had probably been just a part of the game to win out over them. To him, this fight on the road was all that mattered.

"I hate him!" she cried again, but a sob caught the end of her words.

In the days that followed, she felt that she really did hate him. There came rumors of his success, of his triumphan march through the country above. He would be loaded coming down, with hides, wool, other commodities that had long awaited shipment. He had gone out of his way to oblige ranchers and traders in back regions. He was booked up full for his next trip up, already had planned to put on an extra wagon.

"The damned young hog!" raged John Reddon, but his words had a defeated ring.

That same day a sheep farmer stopped at the freight sheds. Amber, hearing angry voices, stopped to listen.

"You've bled us dry for years with your high rates and your rot-

Amber sobbed out her story, the story that brought the heaven of his arms around her. Standing close together in the wild black night, they gazed at one another and realized the truth.

ten service," the farmer declared. "Well, the end o' that's in sight now, Reddon. A man'll be able to ship wool at a fair price. About that load o' mine you got stuck away in your sheds—I want you to hand it over to young Ritchie when he comes down. It's two months overdue in San Roebles now."

"To hell with you and your wool!" snorted Reddon. "He can have it and welcome. I'll throw the damned stuff out in the street!"

"No monkeyshines!" warned the man, riding off.

Amber saw Thorne step to her father's side, heard him say savagely:

"Just wait. I'll even things with that young devil yet! If he thinks he can take trade right from under my very nose—"

Amber, going back to the office, felt the menace of that threat. Thorne would get even, somehow.

There came a change in the weather. The heat dissolved in a heavy rain, a regular sod-soaker that lasted for several days. Amber was grateful, hoping that the coolness would relieve the nagging headaches from which she had been suffering.

One evening she was struck with surprise to see Thorne drive out of the sheds with a six-horse team hitched to a freight wagon. Where could he be going? Not one word had been said about his starting out on a freighting trip. When he swung the team up the road, her heart gave a startled lurch. Ritchie would be driving down. Where would they meet? With the night dark and stormy, the roads slippery, the steep grades, the sharp turns— She hurried out to the freight sheds.

"Where is Thorne going?" she asked her father.

"Up to Wright's for some wool he's in a hurry to get down to San Roebels," returned her father, busy with a paint brush.

"To Wright's?" repeated Amber mechanically.

"That's what I said," retorted her father shortly.

She turned and went back to the house. Between here and Wright's was Long Grade, a steeply curving stretch of road marked by accidents, accidents to both man and beast. If Thorne and Ritchie should meet on that treacherous grade— The memory of Thorne's threat to get even struck her with a shock of dread. Could it be that he would be brutal enough to— She scarcely slept that night, kept starting up out of nightmare dreams. The very patter of the rain on the roof rang like the voice of doom.

Next morning, a rider brought in word of the clash. Thorne had met Ritchie head on just a little below the top of Long Grade and had refused to back up, though it was only a short way to where he could have turned out and allowed the other to pass. It was already dark, the road slippery with the rain. Ritchie had wasted no time after Thorne's flat refusal to back up, but had braked his wheels, shifted his lantern to the back of his wagon, and taking the lines, had

actually backed his twelve-horse team down that curving, dangerous grade. There he had swung out and allowed Thorne to pass.

The town rang with the young man's heroic feat. Contempt, derision, turned on Thorne. A cowardly, rotten trick, everyone declared. By it he not only lost face with men, he lost, too, his reputation as king-whip on the road. The crowd clamored for Ritchie, but the rider told them that he had swung off to drive in to some mines where Gold-Quartz Charlie and a few old miners still worked at claims. Oh, he had an eye to business, that young fellow.

Late in the afternoon, Thorne drove in. Amber, watching, noted the chilly reception accorded him. Some ignored him completely. He tried to brazen it out, appearing not to notice the glowering looks cast at him from passers-by. He swung into the freight sheds, evidently in no hurry to go on.

Dusk was lowering when the ring of bells announced the coming of Ritchie. Instantly, the streets were filled with an eager crowd. As the twelve-horse team came in sight, a burst of cheers rang out. Amber, watching from behind a curtain, saw people running up the road, waving hats and handkerchiefs. When Ritchie drew up before the Jamboree Hotel, hands reached up to him and congratulations poured out at him. But though he laughed, gave back sally for sally, he halted only a few minutes, then gathering up his reins, drove on down the road.

Amber was still listening to the silvery chimes of his bells receding into the distance when somebody knocked and a boy stepped in. Ritchie had sent him to say that he couldn't take the wool down this trip, but if it hadn't gone by the time he came up again, he would take it then.

Amber nodded mechanically, forgot all about it the next minute. Long afterward, she roused. It was growing dark. The rain had ceased, but the wind still moaned about the house. She must give Thorne that message about the wool. Perhaps he could take it down himself when he left the next day.

But the freight sheds seemed empty, and she went on to the stables. She was passing behind some empty stalls when the sound of guarded voices halted her. She recognized Thorne's throaty tones:

"They'll fix that trestle, weaken it so he'll crash right down on them rocks, him and his fancy outfit. No, no. I warned 'em not to do it till they hear them fool bells o' his coming. The minute they've done that, they'll take to the hills. Don't you see? With this rain it'll look like the ground just softened, gave way under that load he's got on."

The voice halted a moment, went on with cautious emphasis:

"Now, listen. From what I can find out, he's got Gold-Quartz Charlie's dust on, likely all the old devil's been hoardin' up for years! When the wagon crashes down into that ravine, you grab that dust and beat it to our joint in the hills. Now get going—go by the creek bed be-

low here. It short-cuts right up to that ravine below the trestle. There's water in it now. You can't be tracked."

Rigid, frozen, Amber stood in the shadows into which she had instinctively drawn. For the moment she was too paralyzed, too stunned, to think. Two men stole stealthily by and out into the night. Then Thorne's burly bulk slid past and on toward the freight sheds.

With pounding pulses, Amber leaned against the wall. Power of thought had left her. But her shuddering senses pictured with horrible clearness Wilde Ritchie and his fine team, broken, mangled, on those terrible rocks below that trestle!

A hundred wild plans flashed through her mind. But she realized sickeningly there was not a minute to lose. Somehow, she had to stop Wilde Ritchie before he reached that trestle! The whinny of her own pony in his stall brought swift, desperate decision. With her next clear thought she was saddling him, hurrying him out of the stable and through a clump of pines at the back. Only one thought gripped and drove her—to stop this murder, to save him from this horrible fate!

Once beyond the lights of the town she swung into the road, rode like mad. Around dangerous turnings and twistings, up curving grades, down steep winding dips, she tore with reckless disregard of danger to herself, her every sense straining to hear above the wind the sound of bells. Suppose she should be too late to warn him, to save him? Every moment brought him closer to that dangerous trestle, waiting to send him to his death. The fear became a searing agony. Beneath her, she could hear her pony's breath like heaving bellows. Her own breath was like a knife within her. But she set her jaws, leaned forward, panting words of encouragement to her mount.

The words broke with a hoarse cry. Faint and far ahead she heard it—the silvery ring of bells! A great sob of thankfulness filled her throat stranglingly, tears swam before her eyes. And, afterward, she remembered no interval between then and the time she was riding beside his wagon, screaming up at him:

"Wilde, Wilde, stop your horses! Don't go another step! That trestle—it'll crash with you! Turn back! Turn back! Do you hear?"

Through whirling senses, she heard the sound of wheels grinding to a stop, saw somebody leap down, catch her as she reeled from the saddle.

She came to, jerked back to reality by a sense of danger. Incoherently, she sobbed out her story, the story that brought the heaven of his arms about her. Standing close together in the wild black night, they gazed at one another. Each read in the eyes of the other the truth. There was nothing between them now but love—love that overrode every barrier of rivalry and enmity. Their lips met, held in a kiss that sealed them for life and death.

Side by side on the high seat, they drove back to Yellowknife. The ring of returning bells brought

people crowding to the street, staring wonderingly up at them. Among them Amber saw Thorne. The baffled rage gleaming in his slitted eyes sent a shudder through her. But Wilde Ritchie had leaped down, was holding up his arms to her. Her feet had scarcely touched the ground when her father's hand gripped her arm.

"Amber," he shouted, "what's the meaning of this? What you doin' ridin' with that sneakin' sidewinder that's out to ruin me? If he's made you do this, I'll bore him! Swear I will!"

His hand was twitching on his gun. But Amber snatched it from him.

"I won't let you shoot the man I love," she declared, her head proudly erect.

"The man you love!" gasped her father.

But, with a sharp cry, Amber sprang at Thorne. Before she reached him Ritchie was upon him, wrenching a gun from his hand.

"You . . . you— I kept you from murder once before tonight!" Amber flung at Thorne hysterically.

"What's this? What's this?" the milling crowd demanded excitedly.

It took her just a few moments to explain. Before she had finished, the mob had sprung at Thorne with threats of lynching. With difficulty, an officer succeeded in holding them off and taking the man into custody.

"I wouldn't ha' believed it o' Thorne," declared John Reddon, shaking his head.

His eyes, bewildered, beaten, turned upon Amber and Wilde Ritchie, standing hand in hand.

"Looks like you got it all fixed 'atween you," he murmured dazedly, but a jovial voice broke in:

"Looks like a mighty good start toward a partnership, the two freightin' lines."

"Can't we get together on this?" asked Ritchie, holding out his hand to the old man. "The Reddon-Ritchie Freighting Co. What about it, eh?"

"Dad, dad!" whispered Amber, her hand on his arm.

Slowly, the two hands clasped, one wrinkled and tremulous, the other firm and sure. A cheer broke from the crowd. They marched John Reddon into the hotel to drink to the new company. To Amber their rough voices were like a strain of music. She was alone with the man she loved, his arms about her. Above them stars glimmered in a clearing sky. And in the song of the wind was no note of danger, only the swinging rapture of love triumphant.

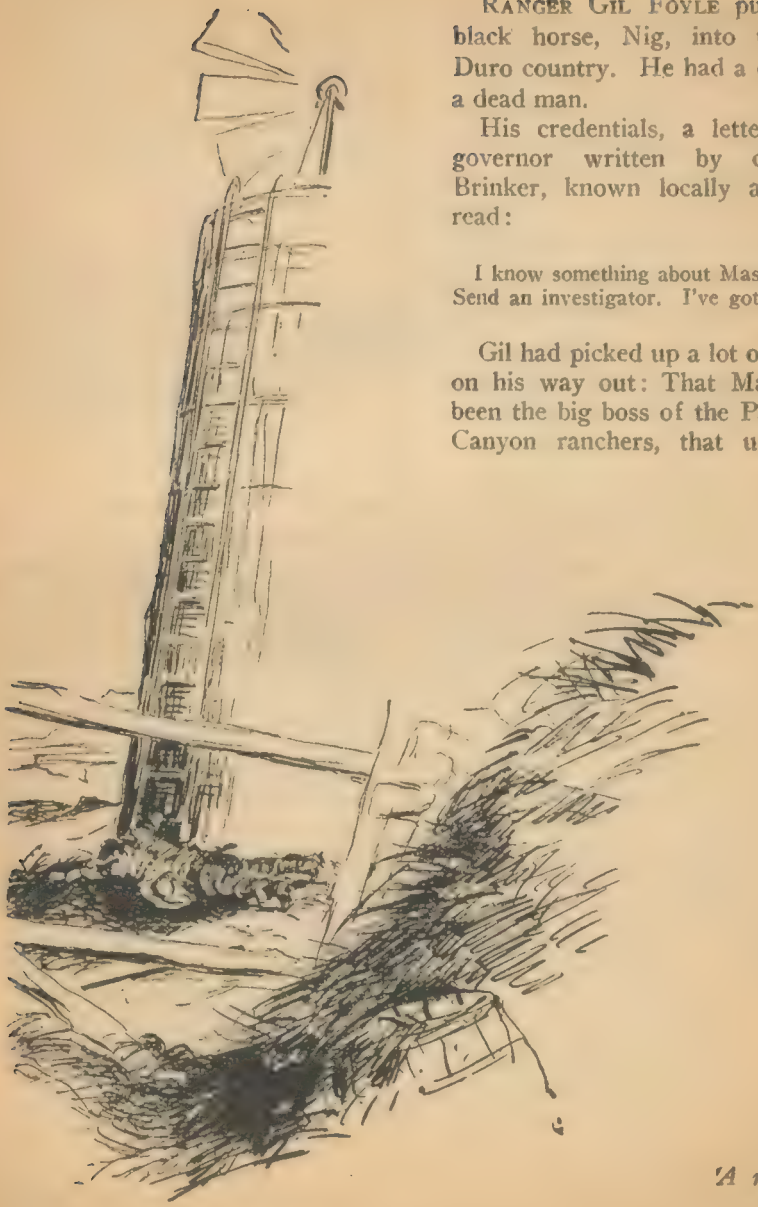
THE END.

DATE WITH A DEAD MAN

by Lucile Isbell

Ranger Gil Foyle wasn't one to commune with spirits an' such, but he was set on learnin' what Bill Brinker had to say, dead or no.

I.



RANGER GIL FOYLE pushed his black horse, Nig, into the Palo Duro country. He had a date with a dead man.

His credentials, a letter to the governor written by one Bill Brinker, known locally as Brink, read:

> I know something about Mason's death. Send an investigator. I've got to talk.

Gil had picked up a lot of rumors on his way out: That Mason had been the big boss of the Palo Duro Canyon ranchers, that under his

A novelette

direction, Brink, Flint, McCue and Deke Simpson had been terrorizing the farmers beyond the canyon, that following a disagreement in the gang, Mason's body had been found crushed to a pulp under a two-ton boulder.

Gil eyed the well cured pasture where sleek Herefords grazed, and decided this must be Brink's land. A field of sorghum lay on one side of the trail, its neat shocks like reddish-brown wigwags laced together by a tangle of gold-studded vines.

"When the frost is on the pumpkin." Gil murmured half-humorously. "Frost was here last night. Brink's been doing pretty well for himself. There's the house and—Hello. There's a woman."

A hundred yards ahead, the trail forked. One angle led to snug white house with a chimney of fieldstone. The other turned abruptly through a wide gate into a pasture. The woman—young she was, Gil saw—stood at the gate, her attitude tense, anxious.

She leaned a little against the wind, her pink sun-bonnet blown back from a proud head bound with shining black braids. Nig's shoe clattered on a rock. She swung around sharply.

"Howdy," Gil said reassuringly. Her wide eyes, a sort of gunpowder black, stared out of a milk-white face. He took off his hat and ran long fingers through his hair. His grandmother had told him often, "A fool might distrust your blue, blue eyes, sonny. But not even a fool could suspect your crinkling, sandy hair."

"Something wrong, miss?"

She smiled faintly. "I . . . I don't know." Her slender hand indicated a whirring windmill glinting over distant treetops. "It's Brink. He went to mend the mill. I heard a shot out there, and—"

"Brink?" Gil broke in quickly. "Bill Brinker?"

"Yes."

A warning prickle traversed Gil's spine. "Was he alone?"

The pulse in her throat throbbed. "He went alone. Later, McCue and Deke Simpson went in. It was after they came out that I heard the shot. Maybe Brink killed a coyote from the windmill platform."

"Maybe." Gil dismounted and opened the gate, his smooth, easy movements belying his energy. "I'll just ride in and see."

"If you would. I can't. I'm a coward, I reckon."

He said earnestly, "I'll bet you're not, Miss—"

"Brinker. Amanda Brinker. I'm Brink's wife."

Gil's eyes flashed over her again. The wind whipped her print dress about her slender figure. Brink had done pretty well for himself, all right.

She was watching him uncertainly. "You know Brink?"

"Not exactly. I've a date with him. The governor sent me. Name's Gil Foyle."

Fear sprang to her eyes. "You're here about Mason's death. I told Brink—" She bit her lip vexatiously.

"What?" Gil prompted.

"Only that Mason's death was

what it looked liked—an accident."

"Queer accident, wasn't it?" Gil countered.

She shrugged. "Mason went hunting in the Palo Duro Canyon. A boulder crashed down onto him. Boulders do fall, you know."

He spoke deliberately, watching her face. "It's going around that Mason and his gang were quarreling among themselves and that the boulder was shoved."

Danger signals glinted in Amanda's cheeks and her gun-powder eyes sizzled. "You including Brink in that gang? He was a good friend of Mason's."

Gil liked a woman of spirit. He drawled affably, "I'm not accusing Brink, or anyone. It was his letter that brought me here. Give me the setup, Mrs. Brinker."

Her small white teeth showed in a mollified smile. "Brink'll tell you."

"Fair enough. You go put supper on. I'll find Brink and tell him it's ready. How's that?" He smiled down at her.

"Fine. You must eat with us. There's cold buttermilk."

"My dish!" Gil declared. He held his mount to a moderate pace until Amanda disappeared. Then he put Nig to a gallop.

Even before he rode into the gigantic swirling shadow of the mill, Gil saw the man lying at its base. Brink would never talk, now.

Squatting down beside him, Gil studied the crumpled body. One arm hung over the lower rung of the ladder. His rifle lay nearby. Gingerly, the ranger examined it. It had been fired recently.

"Everything regular. Even powder burns on his jumper," Gil mused. "I wouldn't be surprised if we don't find the bullet came from his own gun."

They did find that when the doctor from Matador probed the wound.

Gil flinched away from seeing Amanda again. But she came to him in the Brinker living-room early the following morning. Her dark eyes were haunted with pain, though her chin was firm.

"Brink was murdered," she said. "Shot down in cold blood."

Gil recalled her anxiety at the gate, her obvious fright when he'd ridden up unexpectedly. Somewhere a cow lowed coaxingly and roosters crowed for sunup. The living-room was still dusky. It was lighter on the tiny porch crowded with Brink's friends.

They seemed cut from a piece—tall, bronzed, self-contained faces, quiet manners. Only three stood out in the dozen-odd ranchers.

Gil catalogued them. The tall dark one with a face like an arrowhead was Flint. He'd take Mason's place as leader, Gil decided, if he didn't hang for murder. Here was a man with the strength to kill, given a motive.

Next was McCue, not so tall, slightly plump, his eyes gray and fluttering, his cheeks pink as a woman's. Third was Deke Simpson, small, with a high, whining voice.

Gil's blue gaze came back to

Amanda. "The bullet was from Brink's gun," he reminded her.

"Brink's handled guns all his life. He could take care of himself man to man. He was shot down from ambush."

Gil nodded. "You're right. I found plenty of evidence." He opened the screen door and joined the group. "It's murder, men."

Flint's immobile features, his metallic eyes, didn't change. McCue opened his full lips, glanced at Flint and clamped them shut. Deke whined, "Murder? It can't be. Brink dropped his gun as he was coming off the tower. You saw how he'd fallen, how his gun lay. And the shot angled up. I saw for myself."

"It angled up, yes. The murderer was flat on his stomach in a patch of shinnery when he fired that shot. He used Brink's gun, too."

"We don't leave our guns about carelesslike," Flint reminded Gil.

"That means Brink was off guard. Maybe danger had just passed him by. A man lets down, then." McCue and Deke Simpson had left Brink only a little while before, Gil recalled. Aloud, he continued, "Do any of you know what Brink was doing at the windmill?"

Eyes still, they waited. "He was changing the sucker-rod," Gil told them. "He'd finished, got down, turned on the mill—it was running like fighting fire when I first saw it—and walked two hundred yards to a sinkhole he used for trash. His footprint was in the soft dirt there. The old sucker-rod was there, too. The new one in place in the mill."

He gave them a chance to speak. No one took it. Gil added, "Brink must've left his gun with his tools while he went to the sinkhole. It was on his return that he was killed. The body was carefully posed, of course!"

"And the same crawling snake that shot Brink, shoved the boulder off on Mason." The group spun to face the speaker. Amanda stepped through the door, chin up, eyes smoking.

"Mason?" Flint repeated. "You think Mason was murdered?"

"I know it. Brink knew it, too. Show 'em Brink's letter, Captain Foyle."

Gil pulled it from his pocket and handed it to Flint. He read it and looked up. "Brink only says he knows something about Mason's death."

"He believed it was murder," Amanda said. "I told him to stay out of it, that the man who killed Mason wouldn't balk at him. You were afraid of Mason, everyone of you, except Brink."

Flint stated quietly, "I wasn't." Gil believed him. Amanda looked at Flint a moment, then admitted, "No, I guess you weren't."

"I take it all of you want to catch the murderer," Gil began. "So let's get it straight. Mason had organized you ranchers to keep the farmers out. That right?"

Flint said, "You tell us, ranger."

"He had, then. You were terrorizing the farm settlements—"

"That isn't so," Amanda broke in hotly. "Brink'd never have stood for that. They'd just organized, given their word they wouldn't sell a foot of land to a farmer. After all, these men opened the range, made it safe."

"They'd formed a sort of trust, though?" Gil questioned.

Her gunpowder eyes scorched him. Red stained the milky-whiteness of her skin. Suddenly, Gil was remembering Easter Sundays in the valley, strawberries with cream for breakfast.

"The cowmen have their side," Amanda declared truculently. "Sheep ruin the grazing. Plows tear up the soil. Give the farmers five years here and all our ranges would be blown over into the next State!"

"We settled here. We own this land," Flint reasoned in his self-contained way.

She tossed her braid-bound head. "Nobody owns land. We hold it in trust for a lifetime, then pass it on to the next generation. We must keep it fertile for them. Brink told me that."

Gil said gently, "He was right. And the farmers have their side, too. Mason was threatening them, burning them out—"

"Why don't you tell him, Flint?" Amanda cried. "You were there."

"Where?" Flint asked impassively.

"In our corral, the day Mason had the showdown. I'll tell, then. I was there." A concerted movement of surprise met her statement.

She hurried on, "I was hunting my brown turkey hen. I heard loud talk in the corral and peeped in. There was Mason, his face angry red, his barrel chest stuck out, hands on his gun butts, telling you all off. Somebody, some members of the organization, had burned out two farmers beyond the Palo Duro. Some of you were adding calves to your stock, changing brands right on the range. Mason had found fires still warm where straight irons had been heated."

"Did he give any names?" Gil asked.

She shook her head. "He said he knew who 'twas. And that they'd stop, or stop a slug of his lead. I came away. Soon afterward, Mason's body was found under that boulder."

"Did Brink suspect, then?" Gil probed.

"No. Else the governor would've had the letter earlier, despite me." There was pride in Amanda's tone. "Brink'd rather be where he is than a coward."

What sort of man had Brink been, what sort of husband—Sternly, Gil pulled himself back. "When did Brink first suspect?"

"The day after Deke spent the night here—"

"Deke?" the ranchers chorused. They turned on the little man who shrank against the wall. "I never done it," he whined. "I never killed nobody!"

Flint laughed satirically. "You ain't accused." He asked Amanda, "What did Brink say about Deke?"

"Nothing. He just said he'd

learned something about Mason's death. I told him to stay out of it!"

McCue declared loudly, "We gotta ride, men. We gotta find Brink's murderer."

Deke rolled a cigarette with unsteady fingers. "I'm with you. Let's begin at the windmill, work out from there. It's more'n likely some farmer who believes a lot of lies about us. Like Capt'n Foyle heard."

"Could be," Flint said. "We're ready, ranger."

Amanda went inside. Gil followed her. He said in an undertone, "Tell me everything you remember about the night Deke stayed here."

Her fires had burned out, her voice was dead ashes. "It came on to storm. Deke got caught here. My sister, Pauline, was visiting me. We ate supper, sat around awhile, then went to bed. Pauline slept with

me. Brink slept in the spare room with Deke."

"That's all?"

"All about Deke. The wind blew like mad. Some stones from the chimney crashed down on the roof like . . . like the Palo Duro tumbling about our heads. What else happened in the spare room, I don't know. Brink was the shut-mouth kind."

Flint was the shut-mouth kind, too, Gil reflected, as he rode beside him in the posse. McCue, on his sorrel, set the pace. Deke, mounted

Gil looked at Brink's friends. Only three really stood out in the dozen-odd ranchers gathered there. Gil's gaze came back to Amanda. "Brink was shot down from ambush. In other words, he was murdered!"

on a blue roan, lagged a bit, as if reluctant to go.

Gil showed them the evidence he'd found at the wind-mill—the footprint in the sinkhole, the worn-out sucker-rod, broken twigs in the shinnery patch.

"He didn't come in the gate else 'Manda would've seen him," McCue said.

Flint reproved him. "Amanda can't watch the gate every minute."

The color in McCue's cheeks deepened. "No, but she saw us come in and go out. I asked her."

"What other way is there to get in?" Gil asked.

"No regular way," McCue returned. "But a body could crawl under the fence, hide behind bushes." He rode ahead, examining the ground. "If he was crawling, he'd leave a trail."

"It'd be marred by cattle, now," Flint said. "Dodging from bush to bush'd be easier."

"Yeah, that's right," McCue agreed. A hundred yards to the westward a dry gully cut through the rolling pasturage. They turned down it.

Gil followed absent-mindedly. He was thinking of Amanda, her black, black hair, the storm, stones falling off the chimney like "the Palo Duro tumbling," and Deke—

Deke! What a name. Gil's mind played with it. If it was a nickname, it stood for one of the man's characteristics, he knew. Gil dropped back by Flint. "What's Simpson's name? Just Deke?"

"Deacon," Flint said shortly. "He testifies, gives his experience in his sleep."

Whether it was McCue's shouts or some sudden thought that halted Flint, Gil couldn't be sure. And had a flicker of awareness crossed Flint's arrowhead face?

They came up with the others at the water gap. McCue was on his knees, pointing out some straggling marks in the sand there. "This is the trail, men. Right down the gully, he crawled. To the wind-mill."

Flint grunted. "On his stomach."

Gil squatted by the weighted water gate, studying the ground inside and out. His long finger indicated where shod horses had stamped. "Two horses. Two men. One stayed here, likely." He looked at Flint, wishing he knew which side the man was on, puzzling over that almost imperceptible change of expression.

Gil rehearsed the storm—stones crashing down off the chimney. Deke had slept again, dreamed of another crash, the boulder plunging down on Mason, and had testified.

Gil rose decisively. "Which way does this trail lead?"

"To Palo Duro," several answered.

"That's a place a hundred men might hide, isn't it?"

"All of that," Flint said.

"That's where we'll find our men," Gil stated. "Lead on, somebody. Watch for tracks of shod hoofs. You know the way, Deke?"

"Who, me? Not too good." He twisted his reins self-consciously.

"I know it," McCue declared. "I know it well. Follow me, men."

He led out boldly. Now, Gil thought, to get them far from home, keep them overnight. Especially Deke, give him a chance to testify in his sleep.

II.

McCue led them upward, occasionally shouting that here was the trail. The landscape roughened, began to reflect splashes of red, blue and orange. Palo Duro Canyon showed faintly blue on the horizon, then purple.

The midday sun beat down on Gil's shoulders. The odor of hot horseflesh mingled with the clean fragrance of cedar. The tramp of horses, the rhythmic pace became hypnotic. He closed his eyes and there was Amanda's braid-bound head, her proud voice, "Brink'd rather be where he is—"

Gil pushed Nig close to Flint's mount, asked casually, "What manner of man was Brink?"

"Why, your type. Tall, sandy-complected."

"I know that. But what was he inside?"

Flint laughed shortly. "Like you there, too, I expect." He added, "Brink's dead."

"Yes, he's dead," Gil repeated thoughtfully.

At sunset, McCue brought them out on the verge of the canyon and the purple dissolved into a great slash of rainbow hues.

"The trail leads down into the gulch." McCue pointed. "Like Captain Foyle said. See it, Deke?"

"I— Yeah, I see it," Deke stammered.

"I see it, too," Flint added slowly.

Gil got down and stretched. "I don't see it. I'm too hungry. Shall we eat?"

"We're all hungry," McCue said. "Build a fire, somebody. I brought coffee. Me and Deke'll find some game."

Gil took note of Deke's reluctance, his sudden pallor. Flint slid from the saddle. "Deke'll find some game. You build the fire, McCue. I got bread and jerky here." Quietly, the man was master.

Gil saw McCue hesitate slightly before he swung off after firewood. Deke's face brightened. He took the rifle from his saddle holster. Gil said jocularly, "Stay out of the canyon, Deke. A boulder might fall on you."

The little man whined peevishly, "I'm not going down. I'm not going down at all."

Gil watered Nig, rubbed his saddle-weary back with cool grass. He had a pair of hobbles braided of hair from Nig's black mane. They slipped silkily through Gil's fingers, reminding him of Amanda.

He headed Nig toward a grassy hollow down the canyon ledge. McCue's sorrel and Deke's blue roan were grazing there, their forefeet bound.

McCue's fire was crackling and he had gone for more brush. Flint, alone at the camp, unpacked the saddlebags. Gil brushed by him with, "I'm going down in the canyon. See if I can pick up the trail."

Flint said nothing. At the top of the gorge, Gil looked back. The other man's metallic eyes were on him.

The gleaming boulders, the jeweled walls, an occasional giant tree of the Palo Duro brought a tightening to Gil's chest. "Some day I'll come back and see it right," he thought, hurrying along until he could hear the thumping of the hobbled horses over his head. He had made his plans carefully. He would pry a shoe from Deke's blue roan, making sure they would spend the night here.

A crevice in the steep wall and his high-heeled boots made climbing easy. At the top, he peered over the shrubs there. The horses were visible, the blue roan behind a cedar, head up, withers trembling impatiently.

Thus warned, Gil crept to one side. He caught his breath in surprise. Flint had beaten him to it! He was holding the roan's left hind foot between his knees and was drawing the nails from the shoe.

"Well!" Gil muttered, slithering back down the wall.

Gil ambled back to the campfire. The men were eating jerky and bread. McCue passed onions and pickles. Flint stirred the coffee just creaming to a boil, mingling its aroma with that of the squirrels Deke had sputtering over the coals.

"We're hot on the trail," Gil announced, helping himself to food. "We'll camp here tonight and go into the canyon at daybreak."

There was a little silence. McCue broke it. "What about our womenfolks? They're expecting us back. We gotta go back."

Gil waited for Flint to speak. He said quietly, "We'll camp here tonight. One of us can take a message back."

"Let Deke go," McCue urged. "You go, Deke. Your horse is fast."

Gil watched Flint's impassive gaze travel from McCue to Deke. "O.K.," Flint agreed. "Deke can go."

"Better hurry, Deke," McCue advised him. "Git a good start before nightfall."

Deke gulped his food, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and went to catch his horse. McCue made as if to follow. Flint said, "Deke can manage, McCue."

After a little, Deke came back dragging his bridle. "My horse's cast a shoe," he whined nervously. "Lemme take yours, McCue."

Gil assumed authority for the first time. "No use in that. Someone else can go. McCue, maybe."

"No," McCue said quickly. "I mean to be in on the man hunt."

Deke fiddled with his bridle reins. "Go on, McCue. You can pick us up tomorrow."

"Yeah, go on," Gil urged gently.

McCue's face hardened stubbornly. "I'm not going back. Let me be!"

"I'll go, then. I'll take your horse." Deke's voice rose an octave.

Gil's eyes sought Flint. His arrowhead countenance was still. The others had stopped eating, their

faces neutral. Gil pointed to one of them. "You go. Deke'll stay here."

The messenger left. Darkness closed in. With desultory talk, they spread their saddle blankets. Deke was plainly in a panic, his face pasty. He placed his pallet in the circle of firelight. McCue lay down nearby. Long after most of them snored, Gil and Flint sat beside the fire, not talking, not looking at one another.

Coals turned to embers, embers grayed. The sky was black. The dog star blinked at Gil. The south wind blew sweetly in his face. He caught the uneven thumpings of hobbled horses. Far away, a coyote howled and was answered by the pack. A prowling mountain cat coughed in the canyon. Deke turned restlessly.

"Guess I'll turn in," Gil said. He made for the outer circle and lay down facing Deke. Flint spread his own blanket in trigger line with Gil's spine.

Gil cringed to the marrow. Flint's strength appealed to him. Yet, no denying its cold-blooded quality. And Gil remembered Flint's measured words, "Brink's dead." Deliberately, Gil guided his thoughts into more pleasant channels—Amanda's spirited vitality, her black braids, and inevitably, Deke crying out in his sleep.

Deke was dozing. He muttered occasionally against a background of assorted snores. Would he testify? Or must there be something to start him off, something like "the Palo Duro crashing together"?

Gil's eyelids grew heavier. He sensed McCue and Flint were still awake. The coyote pack howled nearer, the cougar's cough approached.

Gil battled drowsiness, tensed, waiting for the cough again. It came. And with it, Gil's gun exploded. Its flame and Deke's anguished cry broke simultaneously.

The posse sat up as one. Gil felt Flint's eyes boring into him. Deke cowered, whimpering, in his bed. McCue stuttered, "What is it? Man, what is it?"

"Cat," Gil said. "I saw its eyes."

They lay down in the dark smothering silence. The cougar coughed no more. The coyotes seemed to have taken flight.

Now, Gil thought. He'd set the stage. He'd done all he could. Gradually, the snoring rose again. The dog star blinked out. Even Flint breathed in unconscious rhythm. Gil dozed.

He came awake in a cold perspiration. A sound, sinisterly muted, had aroused him. Frozen, he listened to the various snores, to Deke's restless mutterings. Suddenly, that ended in a muffled grunt. Gil's hair crinkled tighter. He raised on his elbow, gun in hand.

Straining his eyes toward Deke's pallet, Gil made out a frenzied struggle, deadly in its quiet. The mountain cat? Or— Gil leaped, carrying his blanket with him. Its folds entangled Deke and his attacker.

"Flint!" Gil cried out. "The fire." A hard round object pressed his ribs. Desperately, he shoved the

Gil made out a frenzied struggle going on, deadly in its quiet. The campfire suddenly flamed up, lighting the scene. McCue and Deke were fighting it out.

wadded blanket against it, just as its explosion shook his whole body. Gil rolled over, his revolver blazing.

The campfire flamed up, lighting the scene. McCue, prone on Deke, held his bleeding arm, blabbering, "You've killed me!" Flint, six-shooter ready, pulled him off the terrified Deke, who sat up massaging his throat.

The posse came running, with shouts of, "What is it?" Gil said, "McCue was choking Deke. To keep him from testifying in his sleep."

"No, no!" McCue protested. "I can explain. Give me a chance, my day in court. I gotta right to that."

"You'll get it," Gil said.

"Shut up, McCue," Flint ordered. "I figgered it was you. You killed Mason and Brink. Deke hasn't the nerve for murder. Burning out farmers, straight-ironing cattle—that's more his dish. It was you two Mason meant—"

"Mason threatened us," McCue cried. "I can prove it by every man here. Amanda, too," he added calculatingly. "She heard Mason say he'd shoot us. I gotta right to defend my life."

"What about Brink?" Flint asked. "You found out he suspected you. Yesterday, he told you why, how Deke had talked in his sleep that night of the storm."

"Brink threatened us, too," McCue protested. "Didn't he, Deke? Speak, man. It's your life as well as mine!"

"I'll tell," Deke babbled, "everything. Brink ordered us out of his pasture, yesterday. With his gun, he run us out!"

"You'll get to tell it in court." Gil said. He turned to Flint. "I thought you were on my side. I hoped so. When I saw you pry the shoe off Deke's blue roan, I was almost certain. When you threw the brush on the fire just now, I was sure."

Their hands clasped. Gil stood over the groaning McCue. "You were right, McCue. You said the murderer made a mistake in leaving the windmill running. And that he'd make another. You made it when you said Brink told you he was going to pull the sucker-rod. An hour earlier at the house, you failed to speak up when I asked all of you if you knew what Brink was doing at the mill."

"And you were right, ranger," Flint put in, "when you prophesied we'd catch our men at Palo Duro. Even though you brought them here so we could do it. Tie 'em up, boys."

McCue had his day in court. He would die. Deke drew a long term in jail. That settled, Gil rode out of Matador on his way back to headquarters. He stopped at the Brinker ranch to learn Amanda's plans.

Her sister was with her. Amanda's eyes were haunted. The determined quality of her smile tugged at Gil's throat.

"I'll stay on," she told him. "Try to run the ranch. It's what Brink would want."

"You can do it," Gil said. "You've got spirit. The thing is not to be bitter."

"I'm not bitter. I've got this land, Brink's land, to hold in trust for someone. Someone not born yet, maybe."

Gil nodded. His chest was tight. He swung onto Nig's back and moved slowly toward the road. Amanda walked a little way beside him. When she stopped, Gil smiled down at her. "I'll not say good-by."

She shook her head. "No, don't."

At the fork of the trail, Gil looked back. She was leaning a little against the wind, the early-morning sun forming a nimbus about her black braid-bound head.

"There's a woman," Gil said admiringly. Rising in his stirrups, he saluted her with his hat.

He would ride this way again some day.

THE END

WARNING

A wall may look tough
And a house strong enough
To stand against time's endeavor;
And the love we vow
Seem bright enough now
To burn on surely forever.

But one can't leave a wall
Or a house at all,
Unwatched, to ward off the weather;
For the wind and the rain
Will wreck their domain,
Though the rift be frail as a feather.

And love is a fire
Which will only burn higher
When its hearthstone is carefully tended;
A cross word or two
Between me and you
Leaves embers where flame was intended.

HARRIET A. BRADFIELD.

SONG OF THE WEST

by Bill Severn

"She's as honest as the sun above the Teton,
She's sweet and she has purty eyes of blue,
'And I reckon if I ever caught her cheatin'
I'd drill her full of holes all through and through."

JESSICA PRESTON scaled a dozen schemes in her mind as she sat beside Rush Marshall in the jouncing spring wagon on her way into Sage from the Bar X. She discarded them in a discord of disappointment the moment she entered the crowded lobby of the Elko Hotel.

"It looks," Rush told her, "like you're not the only one who knows Dale Johnson's here."

"They read it in the paper," Jessica said, thankful now that she hadn't brought along her guitar. "But they don't know what he looks like. I'm that much ahead."

"Mind if I stick around?" Rush grinned. "I'd like to see what happens. Besides, I sort of feel like I'm in on your conspiracy."

Jessica gave him a quick smile. It faded as she glanced again at the people in the lobby. There was a white-haired man with an uncased fiddle. There was a middle-aged woman in blue with an overdressed blond child clinging to one hand

and what obviously was a portfolio of music in the other hand. Separated by a potted palm were two men trying to look like cowboys, one with a guitar and the other with a banjo. And Jessica knew the case the man with the wire-rimmed glasses was carrying contained either a piccolo or a flute.

They were waiting, all of them, like so many hunters crouched with their weapons. "But I'll think of something. I've got to get him alone."

She waited with the others, watching the stairs anxiously each time someone came down. Two women and a short man who limped. Then Dale. She checked his appearance against the photograph she had memorized. Wavy white hair, long, thin nose, delicate hands. She stood and crossed the lobby to him. The idea played into her mind like the final chords of an overture.

She turned on her best smile, lifted it up to him. "Why, Cousin John," she said sweetly. "This is a surprise. What are you doing in Sage?"

Dale blinked in bewilderment. "There must be some mistake. I'm not your cousin John."

Jessica laughed as though he were joking. "Rush," she called. "It's Cousin John."

Rush seemed a bit dazed, too, but he kept his grin and came over.

"I said I'm not your cousin John," Dale repeated, annoyed. "My name happens to be Dale Johnson."

He said it softly enough, but it had the same effect as if a train announcer had shouted it. The crowd rushed forward, violin, banjo, flute, guitar and child hopeful.

Dale put his hand to his face, backed away from the closing trap of people.

Jessica led him up the stairs, Rush following and the pack at their heels. She opened the French doors to the dining room from the landing, pulled Dale inside and nodded to Rush to hold the doors shut. "What is it?" she asked, as though she didn't know. "Why are they following you?"

Dale unruffled his disturbed dignity with a bit of surprise. "Doesn't my name mean anything to you? You can't still imagine that I'm your cousin."

"No. I can see now you're not. But you're a dead ringer for him. Who are you—an actor?"

He laughed. "I'm the Dale Johnson who produces the Singing America program for the Apex Broadcasting Network." He waited as though he expected recognition. When she kept a straight face, he went on "And I'm really quite famous as a composer and musician, even though you haven't heard of me. I came to Sage incognito to collect regional folk songs of the Southwest. I wanted to live with the people and get the real music. It was supposed to be a secret, but all the newspapers printed it and now you've identified me and—"

"Oh, I am sorry." Jessica tried to make it sound convincing. "And it's all my fault." She snapped her

fingers. "I've got it. Why don't you come to the Bar X and stay with my brother, Rush, and me? You'd be away from these people who want to get on your show. You could ride into the hills and collect your music from the real ranch people."

"Huh?" Rush's eyes went wide and his eyebrows lifted. "Jessica, you—"

"That's a wonderful idea," Dale said enthusiastically. "I'll pay you, of course."

"Get your things now." Jessica hustled him toward the rear door of the dining room. "We'll make a break for it before anyone finds out."

Dale nodded. "I'm traveling light. I'll pack and be back in no time at all. It's what I should have done in the first place. Thank you, Miss—"

"Jessica Marshall," she supplied, adding another smile. "Now, hurry."

When he had gone, Rush took her arm, angrily twisted her around to face him. "Just what do you think you're doing? Telling him you're my sister and inviting him to the Bar X and—"

"But I have to get him alone so that I can sing for him. I couldn't let him think I'm just a paying guest at the Bar X. He'd suspect the truth, that I'm a phony from Brooklyn who came here like all the others to get on his program." She looked at him directly, pleading. "You will help me, won't you, Rush? It means so much to me. It means everything."

"I'd like to, Jessica. But not this. Granny Wilson would never do this, even if I—"

"She'll do anything you say. You know that. Please!" she urged. "Besides, he'll be another paying guest. You told me you need dude cash this summer so that you can buy that upper ranch section."

"Well, I—"

"Oh, thank you. You're swell!" Impulsively, Jessica reached up her arms and brushed her lips against his cheek. It was meant to be a casual, friendly gesture to show him she was grateful.

It started that way, but he turned his head. The kiss found his lips. His arms went around her. He was kissing her, holding her tightly. She started to pull away from him. Then she found she didn't want to.

"So now you know." He kissed her again, whispering, "It's been like this since I first saw you. I love you, Jessica."

"No." She closed her eyes. It didn't help. She struggled free. But it felt as though his arms still held her.

"Look at me, Jessica. Open your eyes and look. Don't be afraid to face it. You have to now."

She opened her eyes and raised them slowly until they were held by his. She turned away. "No. It isn't true." She shook her head. "It can't be. It's just that I'm excited about getting my chance with Dale. I was dazed for a minute. I—"

"Talk fast, Jessica. Talk hard. And when you've said it all, you'll

get the same answer. The answer I got when I held you in my arms. It's the only answer."

She walked away from him to the window, putting the width of the room between them. But it was as though she hadn't taken a step.

She forced a calmness into her voice. Looking out the window, without seeing anything outside, she said, "Since I was fourteen, I've been learning how to sing. Lessons, practice. Getting a job in a chorus, five shows a day and nobody listening to my voice, but being driven on by this burning within me that had to come out in song. Singing in cheap night clubs, awful places where people drank and laughed and didn't care. But singing. Saving up enough to come here when my friends told me Dale would be here. That's been my life. That's all of me and I won't—"

"And all the time you've been growing up." Rush came over to her. "You've grown up into a beautiful woman who's kept part of her asleep because no one ever came along to wake it." His arm took her. "You're a woman. I'm a man. I love you. It's that simple, see? And you can't deny what comes of that unless you deny you're alive."

His head bent to hers. She felt herself drawn to him. Her fingers gripped the edge of the window frame. "No." She backed away, pressed herself against the wood of the window. "No—no!" She strode to the door, flung it open, stood there, breathing hard. She fought for control, for calm words. She murmured "Dale should be ready now."

Rush didn't take a step, but his look marched across to her like an occupying army, flags flying and bugles sounding. "All right," he said softly. He grinned and the grin was triumphant. "All right, sister."

Granny Wilson sat by the window, sewing neat, tight stitches in the cloth spread on her lap and her lips were sewed tight the same way. Rush had told her, Jessica knew, and granny had agreed because it was what Rush wanted. But that didn't change the old lady's opinion of Jessica. The modern conveniences Rush had installed in the ranchhouse had eased granny's mode of living, but they hadn't softened her stern, pioneer judgment. The only thing soft about her was her love for her grandson.

Jessica watched Granny Wilson's eyes fill with that love now as Rush came into the parlor. "Dale's busy working on some music in his room," Rush said. "This is as good a time as any for you to learn to ride. We'll take a swing up toward the mountains."

"I know how to ride. I used to ride twice a week for exercise."

"You call that riding?" He smiled. "You ride the Eastern way, jumpng up and down in the saddle like a jack-in-the-box. That looks ridiculous on a Western saddle. You're supposed to be my sister. You should ride as if you belong here."

"It's her big opportunity." Dale spoke before Rush had a chance to. "I'll make her name a famous one."

"Well, I—" There was logic to his argument.

"Come on. You can bring your guitar. Maybe I can teach you some real Western songs to sing to Dale."

They rode together across the flat and through the canyon, Rush telling her how to sit in the saddle, how to follow the motion of the horse and relax her legs.

As they climbed, the gorge grew narrower until the trail and the winding silver stream shared a tight space cut between abruptly rising mountains. But as they moved out of the narrow pass and its shadows, the sun suddenly poured full upon them. The warm sky gold bathed a basin of green and brown below them, and splashed down the sides of distant pine-clad slopes into wooded canyons.

"We'll rest here." Rush swung down.

They ground-reined their horses and walked to the edge of the land shelf, sat with their backs against a flat red rock, hot from the sun. Wild poppies scarleted the gradual slope of the nearest hill. A chickaree skittered through the shrubs and a mockingbird sang some of its thousand songs.

Softly, Jessica lifted her voice, matched the song of the bird with a ballad of the hills and a peaceful valley.

Rush joined in on the chorus. When they had finished, he asked "Know this one?"

He sang while Jessica tried to pick out chords to follow him. "No." He put his arm around her to hold her fingers in position on the strings. He sang again:

"She's as honest as the sun above the Teton,
She's sweet and she has purty eyes of blue,
And I reckon if I ever caught her cheatin',
I'd drill her full of holes all through and through."

Jessica laughed with him. She stopped laughing. His eyes were asking a question. His lips sought the answer.

His lips found hers, but no answer there.

She held herself stiff, rigid against the compelling urgency of his caress. "This is wrong for both of us. It can't lead to anything. I don't want marriage even"—she forced herself to look at him—"even if I were in love with you."

He searched her eyes. He looked hard and deep until she could feel the penetration of his stare. He took his arm from around her. Then he got up and said in a cold, tight voice so distant from the warmth of his song and his laughter "We'll go back now."

Jessica stood. "Please don't be angry. You've been such a swell friend to me. So very swell, Rush. I want you to understand what my singing means. It's something beyond me. I—"

"What do you want me to say? That it was nothing, that it doesn't matter, that sure we can be friends and just laugh at this and at ourselves and pretend we never lived or breathed or felt our hearts

beat?" He stalked to his horse, climbed up. "I love you. And if it can't be that, I'll hate you, Jessica." He lifted the reins, moved back to the trail before Jessica reached her saddle.

She plodded behind him, watching the back of his head, the firm resolve of his shoulders. In the pass, trees and towering rocks erased the sun's brilliance. The stream that had been quiet silver now seemed a muddy splash tossing restlessly on its jagged bed of stone. Jessica thought "It's decided. I've made my choice. It was made for me the first day I started to sing. I can't afford to have a heart."

Dale sat at the bottom of the porch steps in the half-dark before full night, listening to Jessica sing.

This was the moment she had planned and prayed for. This was the triumph of her scheming and of her dreams. Dale could make them come true. One word from him and she'd be in radio. With his backing, she'd get to the top.

Her fingers made the chords precisely and her voice sang the notes flawlessly. But there was something missing. Had she dreamed of this moment too long? Had the anticipation been so great that its actuality was dimmed and muted? "Or is it something else, something missing within me?"

She made her voice sweet. She made the tones pear-shaped, pronounced the words exactly. But the song came from her lungs and her throat and her lips. Not from her heart.

"Your voice has been trained, hasn't it?" Dale asked.

"Yes," she admitted.

"It's almost good enough to be professional."

Almost good enough. She lowered the guitar. She felt like crying, like running from him. She glanced at him and found him squinting at her, appraising her. It was hard to see his expression in this light.

He told her "Try it again and relax. Forget you're singing to Dale Johnson. It's a love song. Pretend you're singing it to me, as a man."

She sang again.

Dale was silent a moment after the last note died. Then he said "Not bad. I think you and I could go places together."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"How would you like to go to New York, study there to go on the air on my program?"

It was what she wanted. He was offering her the chance she wanted. "Well, be enthusiastic about it," she thought. "Flatter him. Say something. Don't just stand there." She said "Go on the air?"

He came up the steps. "I know the idea is rather sudden. But I think, with a little coaching, we'd be able to make a click of it." He put his hands on her shoulders. "You'd have to give your life up to me completely, Jessica Marshall. You'd have to let me dictate what you sang, what you ate, what you read and how much you exercised." He lifted her chin with his fingers. "It wouldn't be easy.

Would you be afraid to do that?"

She knew what the answer was supposed to be. This was the prize-winning question. But, instead of turning on the smile, all she could think of was that his fingers on her cheek were warm and grasping and made her feel uneasy. "Don't think of him as a man," she told herself. "He's an opportunity. He's your chance." She managed "I—I don't think I'd be afraid."

"Good. We'll make it a bargain." He moved forward suddenly and kissed her. "That's our contract." He tried to kiss her again.

She twisted her head away, pushed him from her.

He laughed. "Don't be like that. You've got to live. Live, Jessica, and laugh and sing!"

"Jessica!" The sharp voice startled her. It was Granny Wilson.

Dale looked up at the old woman. He shifted his glance back to Jessica. "Tell your grandmother about it while I hunt up your brother. I want them both to know now."

"No." Jessica took a step toward him. "Please, let me explain to Rush. He might not—"

"Very well," Dale said. "If you want it that way. I'll see you in the morning. Good night, Jessica Marshall, and remember, that name will be famous some day. Dale Johnson says it will."

Granny waited until the screen door closed. "I'll expect you to leave in the morning, Miss Preston," she told her. "I was against your trickery from the start. I put up with it because Rush is in love with you. And, well, maybe I thought you'd come to your senses." The old woman's eyes softened for an instant before the cold hardness came back. "But I won't stand for this, your making love to this man so you can get on his radio program. You'll get out as soon as you can go. And you'll take him and his fancy promises with you."

"It wasn't like that. I didn't—"

"My eyesight's not that bad, girl. I saw you kiss him." She opened the door, paused a moment. "If you're not gone tomorrow, I'll run you off. You can make any excuses you want to that man. But you're going to get, understand?"

"I . . . I'll go." Jessica sank to the steps. She lowered her head into her hands. It was so different from the way she had planned it.

She sat there a long time, trying to think it through.

Faintly, she heard the door open behind her again. This probably would be Dale, bringing Rush with him. She had to face it now. It was done, finished.

She stood up. Slowly, she turned. Rush was there alone.

His face, sharply clear to her in the yellow box of light from the door, was twisted, unnatural. "Granny Wilson told me," he said.

"It's not true."

"I didn't think you were that cheap."

"Dale kissed me. I didn't—"

"I suppose you didn't lead him on. I suppose you didn't trick him the way you tricked me."

"I—" She went up the steps, crossed the porch to him. "I tricked you?"

"I was dumb, wasn't I?" His tight laugh was dry and it died on his lips without a smile. "Just a cowhand. You got me to go through with this cheating scheme of yours, let me make love to you, and you were laughing all the time."

"No, Rush." She tried to take his arm. "That isn't so."

"Are you saying that you do love me?"

Her glance dropped. "I—"

He waited. "What Granny Wilson said goes for me, too. You get out tomorrow."

"You can't mean that." She followed him into the parlor. "After what you said. If you loved me, you'd understand."

"I told you," he cut her off. "It was either love or hate. You made the choice. I do understand, too well. You told me your singing meant more than anything to you. More than decency!" He climbed the stairs, his head high, not looking back.

The room was still except for the regular squeak of granny's rocker next to the window. Jessica turned the words on her. "You told him that." She stood in front of the old woman. "You made him believe those lies. You know they aren't true. You know that."

"I know what I see," granny answered. The movement of the chair didn't stop. "He's my grandson. I won't have him hurt."

"You didn't want him hurt? Did

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you see his face? Did you see his eyes"

"No use asking me to feel sorry for you," the old woman said. "You had a choice. You made it."

"I'm not asking anyone to feel sorry for me. I have what I want. You don't think I'd want to stay here on this ranch and work and slave until I'm old and mean and hard inside like you?" Her laugh was a harsh duplicate of Rush's. "Oh, no. Not Jessica. I'm going to be famous. Dale said so. I'm going to be a star—a star—" The words dipped off into bitter laughter as she went to her room.

Morning sun filled the room with warm freshness. Turning over, Jessica forgot for a moment, in the dim half-awareness of waking, the long hours of night she had lain there sleepless.

Outside the window, a bird sang, reminding her of the mockingbird that had sung for her and Rush as they sat together on the top of the mountain. This bird was mocking her now.

She closed the window. She pulled the curtain across it, shut out the sun. Mechanically, she packed her things and went downstairs.

Rush and Granny Wilson were in the kitchen, eating. Two empty chairs were drawn up to the table, plates set in front of them. Granny spoke to her without looking at her. "Sit down. I'll feed you."

"I . . . I'm not hungry."

"We always feed our paying guests. It's part of what they pay for."

Jessica sat down, her arms stiffly at her sides, to avoid further argument. Granny scraped some scrambled eggs onto Jessica's plate, filled her cup with coffee.

"Good morning. Good morning." Dale strutted in, beaming. He drew a deep breath. "Ah, food." He turned the beam upon Jessica. "And food for the soul. You're mighty beautiful this morning." He paused. "Why the gloom? What's everybody so unhappy about? Did you tell your brother about going to New York with me, Jessica?"

She looked up. Her glance caught Rush's.

"What do you think of your little sister now, Rush?" Dale went on.

Jessica's glance held Rush's. She felt his nearness again, as though he had his arms around her.

She closed her eyes and she could feel the gentleness of his lips upon hers. It was so real, so very real. She waited. "Why don't you tell Dale I'm not your sister?" she thought wonderingly. "You said you hated me. This is your chance to get even."

She opened her eyes. Rush was still looking at her that way. He wasn't going to tell Dale.

"I'll be sorry," Rush said softly, "to see my sister go."

"Rush!" It was a whisper. It was hardly a whisper. "Rush, what did you say?"

"It's her big opportunity." Dale spoke again before Rush had a chance.

But Rush didn't have to answer. The intensity, the directness of his eyes, told her she hadn't been hearing things.

And, looking at him, she knew suddenly, clearly, certainly, what she had guessed the night before, singing for Dale.

The song didn't matter. The singing didn't matter, unless she was singing for Rush.

The smile started in her heart, reached her eyes and filled them, and broke into a tiny, sure laugh of decision. "I'm not Rush's sister," she said quietly.

"What?" Dale blinked. "What did you say?"

Jessica pushed back her chair. "I'm not Jessica Marshall. The name's Preston. I'm a phony. The nearest I've ever been to the great open spaces before now was the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge. I came here like the others, to get a chance on your program. I knew you were looking for talent and—"

"Why, you cheap little—" Dale's words choked on his outraged pride and dignity. "You thought you could get away with that. You—"

"She would have, too," granny cut in. She chuckled, and her hand took Jessica's and held it tight at her side. "You never would have known. Except that—Jessica loves Rush and wants to stay here."

Granny took her hand away then because Jessica needed her arms to put around Rush. She held with both arms while granny led Dale, still babbling, out of the room.

Later, when Dale had gone back to Sage, Jessica sat on the porch steps and sang for Rush the way she hadn't been able to sing for Dale. Rush put his arm around her to hold her fingers on the strings of the guitar. He sang:

"She's as honest as the sun above the Teton,
She's sweet and she has purty eyes of blue—"

Jessica's voice cut in softly, her song a whisper, but as sure as the eternal singing of her heart. Laughing with him, she changed the words:

"Yes, I'm honest as the sun above the Teton,
For always, I'll be true, my dear, to you."

THE END.

* * * * * * * * *

"It's the difference 'tween men and women," Heather's pop usta say. "A man works out things logical-like where a woman plays a hunch—and she ain't by no means always right."

DESERT RANGE

by Kingsley Moses

A Novelette

I.

THIS would be a trail drive coming. Lew Gately, of the Big 4, guessed that when he saw the distant dust cloud rolling.

Lew's first, comfortable feeling was that he had fogged his stock in onto this desert range before the strange herd from the south came blundering through to crop the whole valley bare. His second thought was that he'd better get busy. He waved to his elderly hired hand, Useless, combination cook and wrangler for this small spread.

"You hiper over the hill," Lew commanded, "fast as your lumbago'll let yuh. Tell the boys to lay off hayin', and come out here and

play cowboy."

"Naow, that'll be a trail drive." Useless peered, wiping his watery eyes. Though he had been a Westerner for fifty years, the old gummer still retained some of the nasal twang of his native New Hampshire. "Forevermore! They're movin' more caows north than I see since they paved the Chisholm Trail."

"Sure, folks need beef. But skip the history, and go get the boys to help out here. From the look of that cloud o' dust there'll be a thousand head coming, and our own fool stock is likely to want to drift along with 'em. We got to haze our cattle over the hill, and quick."

Happily, the trail drive was moving extraordinarily slowly, not because they were grazing—there was little enough grass even in this best valley of the desert range after Lew's small herd had been here several days—but because the animals were dog-tired. Heads down, the trail herd came on through the failing October sunshine. Lew's two riders, Elko and Tom Troop, arrived promptly.

They were all so busy shoving the stragglers of their Big 4 herd out of the way and over the hill, that it was some time before Lew had time to note that this staggering trail herd was even worse off than he'd surmised. They had hit the dry bed of the wash, which angled through the valley, and had miserably bogged down there, tongues lolling, mooing mournfully, while the flank and swing riders gathered about the figure who was obviously boss of the outfit.

"If they figured they'd find water here—" Lew grunted to the brown-skinned Elko.

Elko, part Ute Indian, tersely agreed, "No catchum."

"Well," Lew considered, his humane side asserting itself, "there's plenty of water in our crick to westward, if they'd just mooch over the hill."

"Our cows needum." Elko did not waste words.

"Yeah," Tom Troop put in practically, "an' if this trail herd heads for the crick, they'll bust plumb through our fine stand o' hay. What with hay costing what she does, Lew, and with winter a-comin' on—"

"Habit it has, worse luck. Wait'll I go and parley."

"Tell 'em go 'long hell, short way," said the breed.

But Lew chose to ignore that advice and pushed his creamy roan, Cotton, to a high lope. "Trouble?" he suggested, arriving presently.

The boss of the trail drive wheeled. In blue flannel shirt and faded Levis, sagging in the saddle, this, nevertheless, was a woman.

"Plenty," was the reply in a deep contralto voice, husky with fatigue. "We seem to have played our chips on the wrong number, friend."

"The wheel will spin again, and you seem to have a few chips left, ma'am." Gaunt and weary as the herd was, there were still hundreds of sound animals.

"Where'd all the water go to?" demanded a second rider, a power-

ful, stocky waddy, unshaven and red-eyed.

"Where most desert water goes, come the end of summer," the owner of the Big 4 answered shortly. "Plumb tuh hell, reckon."

"There was a-plenty, when I was here last."

"There is," agreed Lew, "in April, and sometimes in May. But, beg pardon, ma'am, are you boss or your husband?"

"I'm boss. And he's my foreman," was the terse correction. "But we sure got to find water. Where's the nearest stream?"

Lew did not answer immediately. He could foresee what would happen to his acres of precious hay if this panting herd once got headed toward it. On the other hand, a fellow couldn't just sit back and let even a few beasts perish in agony. Further, if this southeast wind shifted to westward—well, range cattle can scent water a lot farther than two miles.

"Suppose you an' me talk this over?" Lew nodded for the woman to follow him back to the rough ranch cabin. Then, noting that the foreman made to ride along with them, "Two's company, mister."

"We're pardners," the man objected. "Where she goes—"

"Bide where you are, Curt." At the girl's very definite command, the ramrod pulled up short.

"So," chuckled Lew, "you are boss, after all!" The two ambled out of earshot. "This is about the layout, ma'am. My name is Lew Gately, owner of this Big 4."

"I'm Heather Harrison, Box H, down Arizona way. It was my father's outfit," was the husky dry-throated reply. "Dad owned it outright, but it's part Curt Rutter's now."

"How come he chiseled in?" Then Lew was directly sorry he'd spoken, as he saw how gray and drawn the girl's face was under its streaking of alkali dust. "Beg your pardon, ma'am. We can leave them cards lay face down."

"Thanks. Now, about the water?"

As Lew explained about his hay and outlined his plan for watering the cattle carefully, it came to him that here was no grown, matured woman rancher, one of those tough old battle-axes who sometimes make good on the range. No, as with his encouraging words, she sat more erect in the saddle and braced her sagging shoulders, he saw that her back was straight and strong, her waist slim and supple. The lines of worry and fatigue, etched by dust in her cheeks and forehead, disappeared like an actress' make-up when the last curtain falls.

"Two, three dozen at a time over the hill," Lew concluded his explanation. "The sorriest first, and with just you and me drivin' them. All your men, and my three hands, will hold the balance of the herd right here. Check?"

"Check. And thank you, Lew Gately. It's white of you. If you hadn't told us, I misdoubt we'd have found that crick of yours at all." She stretched out her hand, pulling off the stained buckskin glove. White skin, clean, carefully

tended fingernails. Lew had to grin.

His mild amusement at a trail boss with manicured nails was soon forgotten in his admiration at the way she handled stock. The hardest hit stock was presently watered and bedded down beyond the hill. On her black-and-white-splashed pinto, Heather Harrison had gone about her job like a real top rider. "Like you'd been in the saddle thirty years," Lew complimented her.

"Call it twenty," she laughed. "Dad always said he put me on a pony's back to celebrate my first birthday."

"My mistake," Lew acknowledged. "If I'd seen your teeth before I'd have figgered your age better."

"Teeth and hoofs tell the mare's age," she came back at him. "But I reckon I'll keep my boots on."

"I told Useless to tell your men that you were staying to supper tonight. He'll be cooking it now. And, if you'd favor a real bed tonight, I can bunk in with the boys and leave you have mine."

"Swell of you, Lew Gately. No, I won't put you out of your bed. But I will stay for supper."

"Grub pile. Come an' get it 'fore I throw it away," Useless invited.

Over a prime beefsteak and potatoes, which weren't too scorched, Lew appraised his guest with growing appreciation.

Tanned, thin and haggard as her face was, yet the charming glow of youth emanated from her. It might be, Lew conjectured, that she did not scorn to carry a lipstick and powder in the pocket of that faded, blue flannel shirt. Nourished and relaxed, her eyes brightened, too, and the tense line of her red lips softened.

The strain on her was obviously due not only to the hardships of the trail drive, but to the added financial worry caused by the necessity for the safe arrival of her herd at Yellow Bend. Her very possession of the Box H depended upon that. Curt Rutter, she disclosed, had lent her the money to carry on with, after her father's death.

"You had to go to him?" Lew's eyebrows rose in silent comment on the kind of man who would hold up an orphaned girl that way. "And that's why you call him pardner?"

"He is a partner, just now. You see, when dad died, the bank called a note of his which they'd been renewing and renewing for years. Reckon they didn't figure that a young girl was a good bet as a cattleman. Anyway, I didn't have the cash to meet the note. Well, Curt Rutter did, that's all."

"But if you manage to haze this herd clear through to Yellow Bend, you'll be able to pay Rutter off? That it?"

"That's the way she lays, Lew, if I get all my stock through. But if I come out a couple of hundred head short, at the price we're getting now—"

Lew nodded understandingly, looking into the girl's deep-violet eyes. Lovely, tender eyes they

were, in relaxation, with lashes which were darker than her shining chestnut hair and long arched eyebrows which could rise expressively, whether in surprise or interrogation, displeasure or quick approval.

Her nose was straight and short, ever so slightly tip-tilted. Her mouth was rather large, generous, though Lew had seen how tight it could become in weariness or decision. Shoulders, not wide as a man's, but square, a slender, graceful figure. A strong, brave girl for a strong man. Lew felt his pulse beat fast.

"I see," he said, as calmly as he could. "No wonder you were worried when you missed the water this evening. Now, it couldn't be—" The owner of the Big 4 cut himself off abruptly. What right had he to voice unwarranted suspicion? He rolled himself a smoke. "Shall we sit on the porch awhile? It's cooler."

The primitively masculine winter ranchhouse in the Mojave Desert did not yet boast the usual split-cane rocking chairs. Man and girl sat together on the top step, watching the sky fade in the twilight. The pale lemon-yellow of the western horizon, beyond the dog-toothed ranges, was streaked with purple and lilac. Venus, the evening star, glinted a scintillating blue-white, all alone by herself, then was imperceptibly surrounded by tinier heavenly attendants. The ruddy hue seeped from the purple zenith, the sky was a solid blue-steel like, Lew said, the barrel of a Colt automatic. After a little while, conversation ceased. The whole world was hushed.

"Well," Heather murmured, starting to rise, "reckon it's time to be going."

Her fatigue asserted itself. One hand went out to Lew's shoulder to push herself erect.

The pressure of her hand, the nearness of her, upset the lonely man's customary composure. Human nature asserted itself.

Lew had risen. Heather still stood close, her shoulder touching his. His right arm swept around her waist. He swung her into his arms and kissed her.

She did not attempt to struggle. Nor, in the least, did she relax in response. Her figure was no more pliant than the bole of a young hickory tree.

When he let her go finally, she only said coolly, "Did you have to do that, Lew Gately, just because I'm a woman?"

"No," he rasped out, shaken by an emotion he had never experienced before. "No, it's because you're a girl I wish . . . wish could love me."

She stood very straight, facing him, not giving ground at all. Her thumbs were hooked into her belt loops, as if in cool challenge.

"Hm-m-m, I wonder, Lew Gately. I've known some pretty rough hombres who were always talkin' about love. It generally wasn't."

"I may have been rough." He was suddenly, and quite excessively, ashamed of himself. "But . . . but I'm not that sort, Heather. Honest, I—"

at him. Anger and instinctive dislike overcoming all sense of judicial arbitration, he seized the fellow's left leg and dragged him out of the saddle.

Landing on the ground off balance, Rutter went fumbling after his gun again. But the fingers of Lew's left hand clamped into the man's shirt collar and ruthlessly jerked him forward. Lew's right fist bludgeoned him between the eyes.

Automatically, Rutter's hands came up as he staggered half blindly backward in an effort to regain his precarious footing. Lew gave him no chance to recover though. He drove a rib-crashing right and left into the man's heavy stomach and, as Rutter started to double up, another sizzling left cross smashed the fellow's nose in.

Another rider had come up now. It was Heather, Lew saw in one swift glance.

But the girl's short cry, "What are you doing?" had to go unheeded, for once more her foreman's hand had reached to his gun's leather and had half drawn the blued weapon.

Once again Lew was too quick for his opponent. A deft slap knocked the long Colt gun to the sod, and a kick sent the weapon out of immediate reach.

Rutter came weaving forward, dizzy but game enough. Lew ducked two roundhouse swings and planted a short one-two on his enemy's fat jowl. Rutter began to cave, sank limply to his hands and knees then.

A typical rough-and-tough Westerner ordinarily would not then have hesitated to boot his enemy into submission. Most times it's kill or be killed in a fight such as this one. Yet Lew magnanimously stepped back a pace to give the downed man a chance to recover.

"He had it comin' to him," he threw quickly over his shoulder to Heather. "He—"

He saw the girl's face gray-white in the pallor of the dawn's light. "Look out—knife!" she choked, one hand pointing.

Lew leaped back just in time. Out from Rutter's boot a long blade had come flashing. The warning had come just in time.

Lew kicked the wrist, which held the knife, so hard that the steel went rocketing away. Rutter, disarmed, and at his opponent's mercy, stared upward, helpless. Likely, he expected to be trampled to a pulp.

Instead, the young Big 4 owner merely stepped another pace backward, but drew his own gun.

"Oh, no," the girl called. "Don't, Lew."

"Wouldn't waste the good ball," Lew growled. In control of the situation, he stood twirling the gun by its trigger guard, on his forefinger. "Take this garbage away when you've a mind to, Heather."

"But, believe me, Lew," the girl protested, "my stock panicked. It was entirely an accident."

"You really think that?"

"Of course. Why would Curt want to panic cattle on purpose?"

Lew studied her, his face hard.

"There might be a reason."

"What?" The girl's face was set, too.

"Well, he just might not like me," Lew began, then paused. Put thus squarely, on a strictly logical basis, there actually did not seem to be any thoroughly good, obvious reason why the foreman of the Box H should have started a stampede of his own stock. The cattle which had suffered worst already had been watered the night before. Careful, leisurely handling this morning would have served to water the rest. Lew's instinct told him that Rutter had not liked him from the first, told him, too, that the foreman was fundamentally untrustworthy, dishonest. Why should he have tied up an inexperienced girl in such a hard bargain?

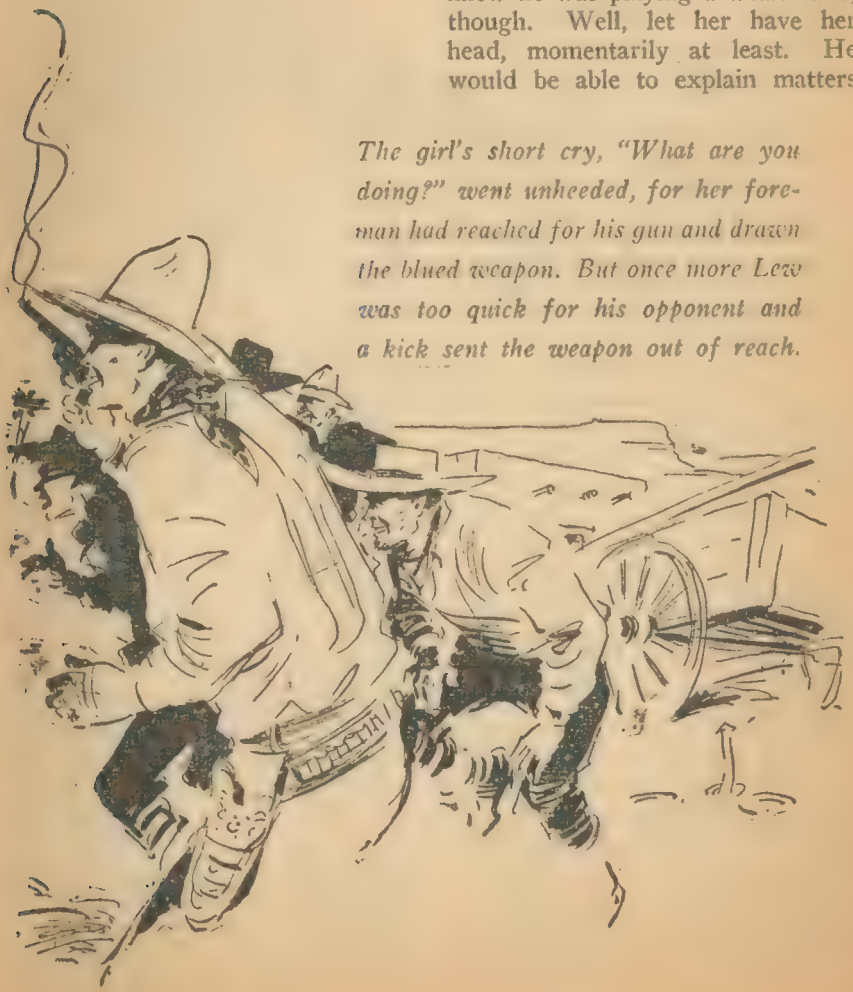
Yes, probably that was the right conclusion, but just try to prove it!

An embarrassing minute of silence. "All right," Lew said at last, "we'll help you fog your stock back to the trail. Let's hop to it, boys!"

"Rest of the gang comin'." Tom Troop pointed to the crest of the hill, where the cowprods of the Box H were tardily appearing. "You might need our guns, boss."

"I can handle my own men," Heather interposed.

She was taking in quite a lot of territory, Lew reflected, seeing what had just happened. But the girl was coolly angry now. Lew knew he was playing a weak hand, though. Well, let her have her head, momentarily at least. He would be able to explain matters



The girl's short cry, "What are you doing?" went unheeded, for her foreman had reached for his gun and drawn the blued weapon. But once more Lew was too quick for his opponent and a kick sent the weapon out of reach.

later, go into more detail.

In this belief, he flattered himself, it developed.

For, in the hours which ensued while the riders of the Box H, under their boss' direction, painstakingly worked the cattle away from the water and prodded them back over the hill, Heather Harrison chose to speak in no more than monosyllables. She had apparently made up her mind as to the rights of this affair and had, with feminine compassion, taken the side of the man who had been beaten.

"Please, Heather dear"—Lew laid his hand on hers, as they trailed along after the now docile steers—"I'm plumb sorry if I acted too quick—"

"Seems to be a habit of yours," she answered coldly, refusing to look at him. "Was last night an example, too?"

"Listen, sweet, you know better."

"Can't say I do." Her voice was trembling a little now. "My stock gets away. My foreman takes after them quick as ever he can. An' then you nigh beat him to death, Lew Gately."

"He pulled a knife."

"Only after you've slugged him till he don't know half what he's doing. I saw the whole thing." There were tears on her cheeks now. The reaction had weakened her. "Curt worked for my father ten years. He helped me out when the bank would've taken everything from me—"

"And took damn good security—your whole spread, for a matter o' fact."

She flashed around at him, "Lew Gately, that's plumb low-down of you! I hate you!"

Spurring her mount so savagely that the startled bronc almost went right out from under her, she whipped away to join her lazily ambling men.

II.

The owner of the Big 4 had a clear couple of days to reflect on woman's unreasonableness. That wasn't much satisfaction. And it was even less satisfaction to be obliged to entertain the gradually growing recognition of the fact that he had acted pretty arbitrarily himself. Heather's logic had been just as good as his own, maybe a mite better. The excuse that he fundamentally distrusted Curt Rutter—well, it was not such a swell excuse, after all.

So, on the evening of the second day after the Box H outfit had gone on, Lew made his decision to go straight to Yellow Bend. Rested, her financial worries solved, it was entirely possible that the girl would be willing then to listen to his explanation and apology.

It developed, however, that she was to come back to him before he could go to her. And her return was no more agreeable than her departure had been.

Heather and Rutter, followed by four of the Box H riders, were in front of Lew's ranchhouse before he knew they had arrived. And all six of them came with guns drawn.

It was just past the hour of noon, a day of blazing heat for that time of the year. Lew and his own men had come in for their dinner after a long morning of work, attempting to save the small amount of hay which the stampede had spared to them. Perspiration-soaked and weary, in old overalls flecked with hayseed, the owner of the Big 4 looked far more the farmer than the cattleman.

"Well, ma'am," he said with some irony, not missing his visitors' display of artillery, and chewing a wisp of hay as he stood there on his front porch. "To what do I owe the honor an' pleasure of this visit?"

Heather, her eyes flatly hostile, sat her horse silent.

"Nice to see yuh back," Lew drawled.

"Oh, yeah?" muttered Useless, just behind him, peeking around the jamb of the door, but taking right good care not to expose himself rashly. Elko and Tom Troop were out in the cook shack, ignorant of this unexpected return visit.

Heather herself spoke at last, her voice vibrant with anger. "We've come back to get our cattle."

Lew Gately blinked. Here was a new one! The lazy grin he had assumed was wiped off by frank puzzlement. "Cattle?"

"Yup. Jest two hundred head." This from Curt Rutter.

The repetition of this particular number, the number which denoted the difference to Heather between insolvency and success, struck Lew immediately as significant. There was something mighty snaky behind all this.

"Hm-m-m!" He permitted his grin to flicker out once more. "Reckon I'm not so good at this here numerology. But seems like I've heard o' that two hunderd figger before! Two hunderd head dyin' o' drought, two hunderd head missin'. I own about two hunderd head." In sarcasm, he assumed an exaggerated drawl.

Curt Rutter interrupted this facetious essay, his gun barrel quivering in threat. "Cut out the comedy, Gately. Where's our cattle hid out at?"

"Wal, I'll bite, mister. Where?"

Rutter's revolver rose, but Heather slapped it down angrily. "I'm dealin' this hand, Curt," she informed him. "Leave this to me."

"An' have him double-cross you again!" Rutter growled.

Heather gave him no heed though. "Lew Gately, I want my cattle."

"Yours?"

"My cattle."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. You allow I've gone in for rustlin', say?"

"You ride along with us."

"An' we'll see," supplemented Rutter.

Lew shrugged at the silly command. "Always aim to please, as the feller said when he run in the pinochle deck on the poker game, so's they'd be sure to have plenty aces an' face cards." He strolled to his sleepy pony, head down in his midday doze beneath the thin cottonwoods' shade.

And, just a half-hour later, Lew got the shock of his life. Combing a deep, twisting draw where grass grew fragrant and green beneath the bluffs' slanting shadows, they came on a dozen strays—strays branded large and plain with the Box H.

Once he had recovered from his first shock of astonishment, it took Lew Glately no time at all to realize what had happened, to recognize that he had been artfully framed.

Planting stolen property upon the premises of an innocent person is an ancient device. More than one crooked cop has slipped a loaded weapon into the pocket of a prisoner whom he could not otherwise hope to convict.

Lew Gately clearly perceived that he himself was in just such a predicament. He knew perfectly well how, and why, this handful of Heather's strays had happened to be found there. Rutter's men had circled around and fogged this bunch from their own herd back. With good graze and abundant water the animals could be relied on to remain here, and be found to accuse Lew.

But, like any other victim of such a plot, Lew's chance of proving his innocence before a prejudiced jury was utterly hopeless. And Heather, role of judge and jury both residing in her own slim person, was surely prejudiced enough.

Yet, Lew could hardly blame her. His own impetuousness, his excess of zeal to protect her against what he believed to be fraud, had precipitated this predicament. A stranger whom Heather had known for no more than a single day had assumed to accuse a retainer of many years' standing, and had not been logically able to prove his allegations.

"Seems like my hide's nailed to the fence!" was as much as he could offer. Then, reflectively, "But didn't you say two hunderd?"

"We did," Rutter cut in. "So come acrost with the rest now."

"I pass," Lew growled at him.

Up went Rutter's gun again.

"No, damn it!" The girl's hand slapped out, this time not at her partner's gun but directly into the surprised foreman's face. Her angry eyes flooded with tears. "Oh, Lew! Lew, what a dirty trick!" Sense of betrayal of trust, more than indignation, was in that cry from her heart.

"Darlin', I didn't—"

"Don't speak to me!" She swerved her horse from his advance.

"Heather," he pleaded, "listen. I didn't steal this bunch. Me, nor my men. I don't know where any more are."

She took hold of herself then. "Fan out," she commanded her men. "See if there are any more here."

Sullenly, they obeyed.

They did not find any more. That was the conclusion of the matter when, grumbling and weary, on horses whose heads sagged, Rutter and his gang came drifting back toward twilight and trailed past the ranchhouse of the Big 4. They did not exchange a word with Lew,

Elko and Tom Troop who, guns handy, watched them mosey by.

Heather followed them alone when it was almost full dark.

She, too, would have ridden by the house if Lew had not called to her, "Won't you light down and rest awhile, anyhow?"

"Fresh ham an' aigs fer supper," the hopeful Useless put in.

The girl, slumped in the saddle, mutely shook her head and made as if to move along after her own hands.

"Then get this." Lew walked over to her, laying one hand on her fagged pinto's withers. "You will take enough of my own stock to make up for your loss."

Inopportunely, through the silence Useless's falsetto song rose, "'We're headin' fer the lay-ust raoundup!'"

Elko and Tom Troop snickered. "He ain't said the half of it," agreed Tom.

Heather said, her voice deadly weary, "Why should I take your stock? If you didn't run off mine—"

"I told you I didn't. Why would you think I'd be snake enough to do such a thing? If you'd only trust me, Heather, 'stead o' that skunk Rutter—"

Still with that dead intonation, "But you see how it looks."

"Then take my stock to make up for it."

She shook off his pressing hand which had covered hers on the pommel. "I can't work it out, Lew Gately. It's got me balked. Not now—for a few days. Too tired. We'll have to let it lay."

Useless's nasal chant came soaring out at the moment, "Whar sayldom is heard a discouragin' word a-a-and the skies are not claoudy—"

Heather nudged her horse forward. Lew, after one step as if to detain her, hunched his shoulders and let her go. What could a man do about this, how, in the end, logically convince her?

Useless's voice cackled, "Grub pile! Come an' git it 'fore I throw it away!"

Watching Heather's form fade into the lowering twilight, Lew growled in bitter humor, "Well, throw it away, nitwit!"

More honest than ingenious, it took Lew a day or so to work out the answer to the problem with which his conscience now confronted him. His undertaking, as he saw it, was explicit enough. He must repay the girl for her financial loss, some way, somehow.

Ultimately, came the answer. Don Saunders, an old friend, was a cattle buyer who would be making Yellow Bend at just about this season of the year.

So, there it was. Make a deal with Saunders to take over Lew's own stock, and pay Heather the right price for what appeared to be her whole trail herd. Saunders would not lose anything. And Heather would never know the difference.

For it happened that a change of brands could be made with ludicrous ease. A "Big 4" would become a "Box H" with but five deft

dabs of a branding iron.

A man blotting his own brand! Lew had to laugh wryly. He rode to Yellow Bend.

III.

Through the desert dust, the Box H herd trailed its slow way toward Yellow Bend. The heat was unseasonable, though always at midday the unclouded sun blazes down fierce on the Mojave. Water, scant as it was, sufficed the animals for a time. They plodded their languid course tranquilly.

Heather, riding wearily, was hardly needed for the work. Rutter and the hands could do it easily. Unintentionally, she began to lag a mile or two back, sometimes clear out of sight. What did it matter? What did anything matter?

Her woman's intuition told her that she had been wrong. She knew, in her heart, that Lew Gately was honest. But wasn't this so-called knowledge of her heart the very thing she ought to combat, this feminine, illogical intuition?

Hadn't her father schooled her to that? "It's the difference," he had so often said, "'tween men an' women, Heather baby. A man works out a thing logical-like, where a woman feels, plays a hunch. Wal, women ain't, by no means, always right. You've seen how so many of the very best women get 'emselves the orneriest men! Intuition—yeh! Use yore head, young 'un. What's it thar for?"

She had used her head till it ached. Lew Gately had stolen her cattle to compensate for the loss of his hay, to get rid of Rutter, or for both reasons. Hadn't they found her cattle on his range?

And, all the time, she continued to know that Lew had not stolen.

So, puzzling, at the second day's twilight, the girl found herself lagging so far behind that she could not even glimpse a stray of the journeying herd. Not that it mattered at all. The wide, trampled track of the cattle could be easily read even by the light of the moon. She would catch up with them as she pleased.

Heather, for this day, had chosen to ride a chunky black called Boston. This animal had a strong strain of thoroughbred in him, was, in fact, much more saddle horse than cow pony.

But, whatever Boston's blood, he had been bred upon the range, and was plenty good enough for the usual monotony of trail herding. Heather, lost in thought, continued to drowse in the saddle as the black took its own path. Not until a late moon came bulging out of the prairie did the girl realize how narrow was the track she was following.

"Huh, queer!" She sat up with a jerk that sent her black into a canter. The trace of the cattle before her was not more than three or four rods wide, too narrow by far for the wide path the whole herd would have made. She dismounted to make sure. Yes, there was only this single track, lightly

trampled and very narrow relatively.

"Some strays crossed our trail, and you, you fool Boston hoss, followed them!" She remounted and thwacked the black's flank. Boston wheeled obediently and started up the back track at a lumbering gallop.

The girl knew she had not been far off the main trail of the herd for more than an hour or so, could have come no more than six or eight miles out of the way at the lazy amble Boston had pursued. Not much more than a half-hour at a high lope should bring her back to her proper road. Yet, strange, in nearly an hour's traveling, she did not find a trace of the Box H herd.

That put her to thinking. Where had this narrow track come from? She seemed to have the idea, near as she could figure the lay of the land, that she was riding more parallel to the line of the trail drive than at an angle to it. Things did look different by moonlight, but—

Which gave birth to a very interesting conjecture. Again acting on intuition, Heather wheeled her horse once more, and pulling down to a fox trot, went back the very way she had come. Later, she let Boston just jog his own gait. The lopsided moon climbed the heaven, touched zenith and began to slide downhill to the west.

Heather was thinking a whole lot.

And the first light of dawning showed now a very fresh trail before her. There'd be some cattle not far ahead. And those cattle weren't strays either. The iron-shod hoofprints of someone who had hazed them along showed constantly, clearly. By sunup she heard the beasts lowing, and spied a spot of dust just over the rise ahead of her. She stirred up the ganted Boston horse.

Sure enough, as she topped the crest of the low, sagebrush-covered hill, she discerned a distant bunch of stock milling restlessly about a damp mud hole.

It was hardly necessary for her, slamming the black to a high lope and quickly coming to the herd, to realize that those strays carried her own Box H brand.

"Yeah, strays!" choked Heather. And, aloud to the desert air, "Oh, didn't I know it!"

For all that had transspired was now transparently simple. The worthy Mr. Rutter had seen his own chance to get even, had thoughtfully planted the dozen cows on Lew Gately's property, and then run off the whole remainder of the missing two hundred. These he could use very nicely for himself eventually. And, moreover, lacking that two hundred, Heather would not be able to pay off her debt. Rutter would take the whole Box H.

Heather's clear mind ran on now to the next move that she must make.

It was her first impulse to ride straight back to the Big 4 to find the man for whom she had so strange a feeling, a feeling she had never known before. Yes, she must tell Lew Gately how foolishly, criminally wrong she had been. But

she guessed, somehow, that Lew would not be slow to forgive her.

Yet, what would be the ultimate result of any such headlong action? Lew would instantly hit out for Yellow Bend, like as not to kill Curt Rutter. And a lot of good that would do!

Or, for Rutter was dangerous, perhaps Lew would get killed himself—

No, play this hand some other way. She'd go first to Yellow Bend herself, handle her own affairs in her own independent manner. After that, and not im-

poverished, pleading, but still the legal owner of her fine Box H, she'd go back where her heart bade her go.

Forgetting the aches of twenty-four hours in the saddle, Heather slowly circled the milling mass of stock which snuffed and sucked at the mud of the almost dry water-hole. A hundred and ninety head, about, she pretty accurately tallied them.

They were in sorry condition. This would be the fourth day they had been without decent graze, and quite a while, too, without adequate

But, like any other victim of such a plot, Lew's chance of proving his innocence before a prejudiced jury was utterly hopeless. And Heather, rôle of judge and jury, was surely prejudiced enough.

water. They showed it. Wild eyes were bloodshot and heads were hanging low. Tongues were ashy-black and swollen, lolling out of muzzles which were foully smeared with the mud where there was so pitifully little moisture. Not more than half were strong enough to travel at all—some of the bigger fellows which had stored up some fat to get by on.

One particularly big-horned brute even seemed to have fight in him. As Heather rode close in, this herd boss turned to confront her. His bloodshot eyes glared, and muddy slime sprayed from his nostrils.

Then, quick as a Spanish bull bred to battle in the arena, the maddened beast launched his huge weight right into the black pony's breast. Boston reared high, and the yellow horns ripped him wide open.

Heather, utterly unprepared for such an attack, flung herself free on the off side.

Almost free. For, for a second, one boot caught in a stirrup. She felt herself dragged in the mud.

Then, mercifully—her boots were short and not tight—the whole soft right boot came off and freed her.

But she was flat in the mud. The plunging horse and the maddened steer seemed to tower and topple above her. And, not a rod away, other gaunt, wild brutes edged forward.

A ghastly whirl of images, stricken horse and his bloody-horned conqueror, shifting, threatening the cattle, with heads lowered and hoofs that trampled, and her only recourse the six-gun which, for a moment, seemed to have jammed in its leather.

Then one desperate shot blazed upward into the steer's heart as it towered above her. The brute's great bulk, careening down, just missed the girl as she scrambled on her hands and knees from beneath its fall.

But she was upright at last, slipping and teetering in the mud with only her one foot shod, but upright and with Colt gun ready. The steer lay, huge but still. The horse gurgled once and was dead, too.

Two more shots Heather flamed right into the other steers' faces. Terrified, the leaders retreated, bumping and milling.

Heather moved slowly away to ground of firmer footing. Still she faced the woeful herd, but had no more fear of them. They would not blindly rush her now. She knew horned cattle well enough, dumb, driven creatures for the most part, if not tolled by a natural leader.

It was only as tenseness relaxed that she became aware of the pain in her right leg. In wrenching loose from the boot, her ankle had been sprained severely. Already, it was throbbing and beginning to puff up. Impossible to get on her boot again.

Keep walking—don't let it stiffen! Common sense told her that.

Already, the day was hot as the sun arched upward. The dun swaths of thin grass, patched with crusted gray salt bush or purplish sage, rolled westward, league after

league to the faraway barrier of the mountains. Her cloth-covered water bottle, which she released with repugnance from the dead pony's cantle, had hardly half a pint in it. How long before she'd sight anyone?

The logical consideration of such an eventuality was certainly not reassuring. She resolutely dismissed it from her mind as she painfully set her course along the back trail westward. Nor had she gone more than a few hundred yards before she recognized the impossibility of progressing in this hop-skip, one-shoe-off-one-on fashion. She yanked off her high-heeled left boot.

In thin white, half-wool socks she was poorly equipped for tramping. The blue work overalls she wore became unbearably heavy. She got rid of those as she had her boots, and pushed on in her only remaining garments—black sombrero, white madras shirt, trousers of light-gray flannel.

She thought she had gone several miles—certainly the sun was so high as almost to touch the meridian—when she first permitted herself to look back. The irregular circle of reddish cattle, inert in their miry wallow, seemed no distance at all behind her—a couple of miles, looked like. She tried to console herself with her knowledge of desert visibility. Nipping at her water bottle, she stubbornly journeyed on.

Pain in her ankle seemed mercifully to relax now and then. The heat would dizzy her—a hundred and thirty and more it would have been, in the sun's full glare. Each breath was as if from a furnace mouth. She felt the burn of fever. Then a merciful start of perspiration would break up the pressure, clear her head for a time.

"Keep your chin up, girl!" she chided herself aloud. "Ten, twenty miles—somebody's sure to see you!"

On that gallant delusion she did not, however, permit herself to dwell unduly.

The sensitive soles of her feet had avoided as much as possible the pebbles and volcanic fragments strewn through the salt bush and sage. Now a flat, alkaline *playa*, a smooth expanse of granulated white sand which had once been a lake, afforded a welcome path for a while. Not until she glanced back did she perceive that the soles of her feet were leaving a splotch of blood with every imprint.

The thin socks were raveling out. The burning of the sand against her sensitive bare feet became intolerable. Running as fast as she could, though she knew she staggered, she reached relative relief amid the sage clumps again. Then she fell, as a pebble turned under the ball of her foot.

The sharp pain made her sick. It was hard to push up again. On hands and knees, panting, she lingered.

Then she saw the horseman on the ridge.

The figure was distinct enough, sitting a tall gray cow horse. It did not seem to have perceived her at all, though, to be slightly turned away.

It would be Lew—Lew Gately, the lean, easy length of him, his comfortable slouch in the saddle, the biscuit-colored sombrero. There could be no mistaking him. Somehow, he'd come out to search for her. Some instinct had informed him of her desperate situation.

Heather leaped erect, careless of the anguish which racked her. She shouted, however vain she knew that might be, and waved her big black hat in desperate, panicked signal. Presently, in that vast emptiness, she would be spied. Yet the figure did not stir itself.

The girl leaped stumblingly forward. If only she could catch the attention of the man she loved—yes, she knew now that she loved him.

And he loved her, had forgiven her. She knew that, too. Else, why had he attempted to track her down?

Again she waved and called, and saw that, on the yellow hill against the hard blue horizon, there was no sign of a horseman. Before her staring eyes, without turn or movement, the phantom rider had vanished.

Heather Harrison always had lived in desert country. She had known mirage before, its peculiarly magic manifestations. But that mirage should occur here, now, now that it meant everything— It was too incredibly cruel. Here was an end to it all.

Her body told her that. She had weaved her way to an outcropping boulder, banked along its windward side by masses of loose tumbleweed. She felt her own strength to be as fragile and brittle as the vagrant weed which her fingers were mechanically crumpling. The very essence of her vitality had drained away, with the perspiration that soaked her clothing, the blood that traced her trail.

It didn't seem as if she could take another step. She could do no more than lift her fingers to loosen the throat of her collar, as if to breathe in more air. Her hat had fallen off, and the coiled braid of her bright chestnut hair had come unbound and was falling loose over her shoulders.

Yes, sardonically, here was the truth she thought she'd been seeking, the bitter end of her logic. If sunstroke did not kill her quickly, then exhaustion would finish her off less mercifully. No shelter, no strength to walk, not a drop of water.

Yes, that was logic. And, perversely, intuition told her otherwise. Lew couldn't come. There was not the slightest reason to hope for his coming. He did not know where she was. Possibly, after the way she'd treated him, he did not care.

Yet he would come. She knew it, make sense or no.

Why, to be sure, of course, there he was, clear as could be against the skyline. The tall gray horse, the lean rider in faded yellow and wide sombrero. But still he was not looking her way.

And the sunshine was getting brighter and brighter, like particles of gold in quartz rock. You could reach out and grab handfuls of it,

and let the flecks trickle through your fingers.

Lovely, lovely dust—valuable dust, too, ever so precious. You could buy things with it, buy cattle—two hundred head of cattle. No, no, hold it tight, girl, you mustn't lose it, not let the lovely dust go sifting away.

But this sand dune in front of her, this little gentle slope, ought not to be tilting up and up that way, till you could hardly see the blue sky at all. All the lovely gold dust would slide away, slide away and be lost forever, like the cattle.

But the dune kept tilting higher now, terribly higher, almost straight up, like a funny wall! Funny wallpaper—sagebrush and pink flowers, owl's clover, prickly phlox, lavender desert candles, scarlet Indian paintbrush, golden coreopsis.

Mirage! She fell flat on her face, bare arms thrown wide. "Mirage! All mirage," she murmured. Yet she, even then, wondered dully, "But in mirage you don't hear things—things like a horse's hoofbeats!"

Lew's encircling arms had cradled her all the way home. She hadn't opened her eyes, but constantly she had been muttering, "Wallpaper, gold dust, two hundred head of cattle. Logic, honey, logic. Oh, yeah, t'hell with logic." But more than once, too, in her delirium, she'd said distinctly, "Darling! Lew darling!"

Lew had told her his story, talking gently, slowly, as if to a child, though he doubted that she understood. He told how he had ridden to Yellow Bend, only to find that she never had arrived there, how he had come face to face with the thieving Curt Rutter, and had shot the man through both shoulders in order to disarm him.

Then Lew himself had come hellbent down the back track of the main trail drive. The low-circling vultures had warned him where to watch for the trace of the off trail. Then the gutted horse and slain steer, presently bloody human footprints, had pointed his path unmistakably.

Arriving home at last, he washed her wounds with cold water as best he could, laid her out on the long bench on his porch, covered by only the thinnest sheet. He sent Troop for a doctor.

The ancient Useless, messing around with supper, sang, nasally, "The Last Roundup." The evening was utterly still. Lew, so close to the bench that he could touch the sheeted figure, watched the moon rise.

"I want a drink of water."

"Darling!" Lew leaped up. "You're awake?"

"Please. I want a drink of water." The plaint was the cry of a sick child, pitifully appealing.

"One glassful, no more. There, sweet, better?"

"Oh, yes." Intelligence came to her beautiful eyes. "Why, where—Am I home?"

"Y-yes, Heather."

"I . . . I've been sick?"

"Very sick, dearest."

"But I'm going to be well now?" There was still, in the quavering voice, a note of a child's vague confusion.

She tried to rise on one elbow, was directly fully conscious. "Why, Lew, dear Lew, I remember now." She shivered a little. "But, Lew, what have I been saying?"

"Saying you were home, sweet."

"And . . . and I am?"

"Damn tootin' you are, Heather darling!"

From the cook shack came Useless' song, singularly timely, "'Ho-o-o-me, ho-o-ome on the raynge.'"

THE END.

* * * * * * * * *

COWBOY LOVE

I wear your brand and no mistake —
An arrow and a heart.
There's not a rustler who can fake
Cupid's designing art.

Above the milling of the herd
And by the campfire's flame,
The wind keeps whispering a word
To me. It is your name.

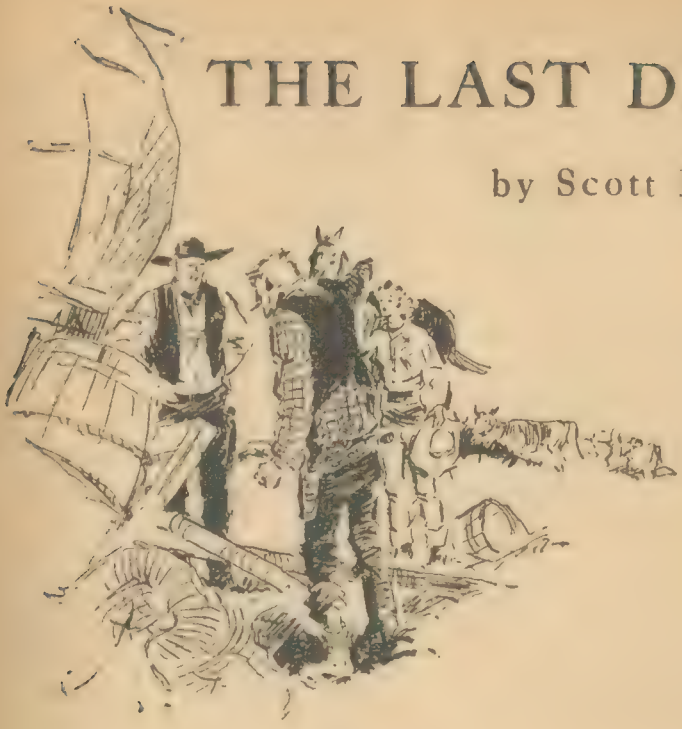
I used to think the grassy range
Was all the love I knew.
Something or other made me change.
Guess it was meeting you.

A cowboy finds things hard to say.
The words don't seem in tune,
But could we have a roundup day
Down at the parson's soon?

CLARENCE EDWIN FLYNN.

THE LAST DRIVE

by Scott Elsworth



UNCLE IKE had been moved into the wagon and all that day he had sat propped up, staring out gloomily, his great thatch of crystal-white hair rumpled every which way, his discontented eyes looking for something to criticize.

"The boss sure is ornery since Big Blue made a fool of him, Miss Lona," Red River said. "Blue is the best lead bull north of the Rio Grande, but he don't cotton to this trip. You reckon he could know Ike means to drive on past the railroad and look for a ranch up north somewheres?"

"I believe he does," Lona answered. "I wish Uncle Ike wouldn't be so stubborn!"

"Sure, the omens has been against us from the start. Crossing Indian territory, every river was over its banks and the way those red brothers cut out bunches of our best steers and hazed them into the timber was a caution. Then Ike makes up his mind to lick the nonsense out of Big Blue with a bull whip, and gets himself and his horse tossed for a nasty fall. I ain't what you'd call superstitious, but—"

Just what Red River was willing to admit about his beliefs and feelings, Lona Waring never learned. A man came riding through the late-afternoon sunshine—a tall man with a silver star pinned to his unbuttoned vest. He forked a tall bay horse that single-footed daintily toward Lona, who was riding Geronimo.

This stranger's eyes were silver-gray. There was a triangular dent in his chin and he wore two long-barreled six-guns from a wide, plain gun belt. No silver conchas, no ornaments.

"I want to talk to the boss of this outfit, miss," he said, picking out Lona as the person in authority, after a brief glance at the red-headed trail rider beside her.

"I'm the boss, stranger."

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You mean you own this trail herd?"

"Well, I—"

"If the owner is around, I'd rather talk to him."

Lona felt herself flushing. So a girl who had grown up in the saddle and who could read brands with the best of them wasn't good enough for this lawman!

"I—" she began.

But at this moment the shaggy white head of Uncle Ike Keller appeared around the end of the wagon and Uncle Ike's stentorian voice reached them.

"Who the billy-hell is that tinhorn, Lona? He trying to make trouble? Bring him over here!"

The "tinhorn" gave Lona a faint smile of obvious amusement. And Lona's flush became a sizzling blush of anger. She rode at a trot after the departing stranger.

He reined in beside the wagon. "I'm John Darcy, marshal of Quilltown," he said. "You own these steers?"

"I sure do! My brand is on 'em, and a road brand. If this is some newfangled idea for making trouble—"

"No trouble at all, stranger. All you've got to do is to keep out of our town, also refrain from trying to cross any of the farms 'round Quilltown."

Lona laughed, a tinkling, scornful laugh. "Isn't that wonderful!" she exclaimed. "Quilltown—the dump Uncle Ike Keller and his friends put on the map! Who got the railroad to put in a siding there? Who furnished money for holding corrals and loading yards? Now—"

"Now the times are changed, and this part of the country has grown up, miss," John Darcy said. "I've heard of Mr. Keller and I'm sure sorry I've got to turn him back. But that's what I'm hired for."

Uncle Ike began to roar. "The blazing hallelujah take you and all the town dudes you work for! I'll drive my cows through your dirty little town—"

"I don't think so, Mr. Keller. Other trail drivers have tried it. They all turned back, without some of their best men."

Ike Keller tried to swing around so that he could drop down from the wagon. A contortion of pain twisted his dominant, sun-browned old face and he sagged limply

against the side of the wagon box.

"You git out of here!" he muttered. "Ride, and ride fast! But you'll see me and my herd sometime day after tomorrow!"

Lona sat silent and angry. This tall, disagreeable young lawman glanced at her and seemed about to speak. Then perhaps he noticed her heightened color, her stormy eyes.

With a shrug, he wheeled his bay horse and rode away. But Lona saw him stop and talk to Red River and some of the other riders.

Five minutes later, the red-haired foreman from the home ranch, back in the Panhandle, rode up to the wagon. "I reckon we got to head them back, Ike," he said. "That was John Darcy."

"And who is John Darcy?" Lona demanded.

Red River loked at her with obvious surprise. "You ain't heard of him, Miss Lona? His dad was Wes Darcy, the best town marshal along the trails. But Wes always tried to give the other fellow a chance to save his face, and an ornery skunk got him with a hideout gun. This present Darcy is a different kind. He shoots first and asks his questions afterward."

Uncle Ike was trying to restrain his temper. "We ain't turning back, Red," he growled. "We can take the herd through."

"It'd mean shooting, boss, and you ain't got a real gun fighter on your pay roll. Listen, we been running into omens over since we forded the Canadian. You know what we run into, and remember, for the first time since you promoted him to be lead bull, Big Blue balked at heading them north. Why don't we just take the hint and head back for the home ranch? You got a gold mine there if you'll develop it, 'stead of using it for a spring board for hopping into all sorts of crazy messes!"

Lona had been all for developing the home ranch instead of attempting to find a better one up north, but now she suddenly found herself supporting Uncle Ike.

"You mean we should just let this tinhorn with his nickel-plated star bluff us, Red River?" she demanded.

Red River's chocolate-brown eyes were sullen. "John Darcy ain't no tinhorn and he ain't bluffing," he answered. "Farthermore, miss, if you and Ike decide to head on up the trail you'll have to do it by yourselves. We wasn't hired to fight except in the regular way of duty. We're heading back."

It was an ultimatum. Old Ike Keller looked sad and gentle. "O.K., Red," he said. "You boys head back. Take in your time to Clem Nitzer when you get to the ranch. He'll pay you off."

Perhaps Uncle Ike didn't believe the men would really leave. Lona herself hoped they wouldn't. But they rode silently up to the chuck wagon, fished out their war bags, and without even saying "good-by," trotted away into the early darkness.

"Skeered," Uncle Ike muttered. "Well, honey, what we goin' to do

now? We got old Chickie left—him and his Dutch ovens. But who's going to handle the herd?"

The cattle had been driven in on the bed ground and were beginning to settle down for the night. But with the first graying of the eastern sky, tomorrow, they would be up and ready to move.

Lona patted Geronimo's neck. It began to look as if she would spend most of the next two months in the saddle, without ever closing her eyes. But even if she worked twenty-four hours a day she couldn't make it. There had to be more hands.

Then she remembered something. Riding on the flank with one of Uncle Ike's trail men, about two miles back along the trail, she had seen a campfire and three or four men lying negligently around it.

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "There's an outfit camped back down the trail a piece. Maybe I can hire them."

Ike Keller looked apprehensive. "I saw those buzzards, honey. They looked tough and I ain't going to have you—"

But Lona patted the ivory-handled Colt swinging from her belt. "Don't you worry about me, Uncle Ike," she told him. I'll bring them back, dead or alive!"

Four men sat about the small campfire when Lona Waring rode out of the dark. Two of them sprang to their feet, swarthy hands swung toward gun butts. Then the strangers saw that their visitor was only a girl, and relaxed.

"You boys looking for work?" Lona demanded.

A lean man with a hooked nose and a sharp-pointed gambler's mustache walked toward her. "What kind of work you alluding to, lady?" he asked.

His voice was soft, almost purring. And his black eyes had little needle points of fire in them. Lona hesitated, but men had to be found. Briefly, she explained. She noticed that when she came to the name of John Darcy, the two men still sitting beside the fire got up and joined their leader.

He let her finish without interrupting. Then he looked at his companions. "How about it? You boys want to take this herd through Quilltown? And maybe have to swap lead with Darcy?"

They were smiling, all of them. They seemed to have some joke of their own, about the lawman who ruled the railroad town. They didn't answer the question asked by the hawk-nosed man, but he evidently knew what they had decided.

"O.K., lady, we'll take the job," he said. "And don't worry because there are only four of us to handle the herd. If you got a good lead steer—"

"Big Blue is the best lead bull on the trail!"

"Fine. These schoolmarms of yours have lit out already?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll ride back with you and get on the job tonight!"

She ought to feel relieved, but she didn't. A vibration of danger

came from these four swarthy trail riders. Lona noticed that each of them wore two guns, with the holsters tied down with leg thongs. And she thought of John Darcy, who had said that no cow outfit should pass through his town.

"He would have it this way," she thought defensively. "If anything happens—"

Something would happen. It was the old problem—the immovable obstacle was going to be struck by the irresistible force.

Two of the strangers went out to ride herd during the night. The man with the hooked nose talked to Ike Keller. He said his name was Les Chismore and that he and his companions had been heading south after delivering a herd of steers to a government buyer.

"Ever hear of this Darcy feller?" Uncle Ike demanded.

Those needle tips of light in Les Chismore's black eyes seemed to brighten. "Heard of him, yes, mister," he said. "Maybe we'll meet him. If so, we'll see what we can do."

But Lona, lying wrapped in her blankets under the chuck wagon, didn't believe Les Chismore's feeling toward the young town marshal was as casual as he had pretended it was.

"Those ruffians took this job because I told them about John Darcy," she whispered. "Oh, I wish Uncle Ike would turn back!"

No chance of that. By dawn, the trail herd was on the move. The four new riders snatched breakfast and were back in their saddles. Ike Keller, peering around from his position in the end of the wagon, watched everything.

"They know how to handle a herd," he muttered.

But the old man's eyes were bleak. Lona, riding close by, nodded. "They can handle cattle, but I'll bet they have done more rustling than honest trail riding," she said. "Never mind, Uncle Ike. We didn't have any choice."

The herd was strung out for over a mile. Back of it came the wagon and a single drag rider. Les Chismore rode around and around, helping out wherever the shortage of men made itself apparent. And Lona, unwillingly admiring the way these swarthy rascals kept the great mass of steers and stock cattle in control, did her part.

Riding for a time with one of the flank men, she asked, "When do you think we'll hit Quilltown?"

He slid a suspicious look over her face. "Quilltown? Oh, sometime tomorrow, miss. I reckon we won't have no trouble there."

He was lying, certainly about the trouble, probably about the time they would reach John Darcy's town of merchants. At midday, while the cattle were moving along the banks of a stream, Lona cautiously approached a fringe of alder. Beyond it, she had seen Chismore and a burly fellow with the tip of his left ear missing, engaged in frowning talk.

She glanced back. No one in sight, except Uncle Ike, who watched her from the end of his wagon. As she stepped farther

into the brush, green twilight closed about her. She moved forward.

"Anyhow, that's the way we're going to work it." Chismore was saying.

"You want to remember, Les, this ain't old man Darcy we're going up agin'," the other voice replied. "This young feller is tricky. Suppose he tumbles what we're up to?"

"What can he do? Listen, Buck, when them steers—"

The voice dropped. Lona heard the two men muttering. She slid out of the brush, headed downstream.

So they were up to something! Something that concerned the man with the silver-gray eyes, but just what it was, Lona couldn't decide.

She returned to Uncle Ike's place of observation. "They're up to mischief," she said softly. "Keep your eyes open!"

But there was nothing to see that afternoon. The cattle moved rapidly. Those brown-faced drivers were urging them on. Lona rode ahead, peered into the north. Was that smoke, far in the distance?

The sun was sliding toward the purple mists of the prairie. Lined up along a series of ponds the cattle drank, began to bunch for the night.

Lona looked around, but no one seemed to be watching her. She turned Geronimo abruptly, rode him into a patch of alder.

"You'll just have to wait here with your saddle on, old boy," she said. "I want you ready in case something happens."

She headed back for the wagon. And as she came around the end, she saw Uncle Ike Keller sitting back, his face waxen-white, his big eyes blazing with rage.

The burly man, Buck, held a revolver. Lona recognized it as the bone-handled .45 Uncle Ike had carried for years. Buck nodded to Lona, leering amusement in his shallow black eyes. He stepped to her side and, before she could move, he had jerked her six-gun from its holster.

"Now, little lady, you jest climb up with old Uncle Timbo, and behave!" he growled. "One yelp out of either of you and you'll get it right under the forelock!"

Lona counted five, then she counted ten more. She held her arms rigidly against her sides. The burly man stared cynically at her.

"That's better," he said. He turned and tossed the two captured revolvers into the bunch grass. "Git in with the old man. I'm your guard!"

Uncle Ike was on the point of exploding, but Lona gripped his arm tight and shook it. "Keep still!" she whispered.

"Git clear back inside there," Buck snarled.

The old man inched his way back. Lona kept beside him. "They got Chickie hog-tied—he's lying out beside the cooking fire," Ike Keller muttered. "Then, when I was peeking 'round to see what was up, this spavined tick grabbed my shooting iron!"

"Don't talk!" Lona said.

The hooked-nose man swung up both guns and fired, but the town marshal of Quilltown had beaten him by a matter of seconds.

She held herself rigid, listening. She could hear the cattle beginning to bawl.

"I think the railroad, and Quilltown, are just ahead!" she whispered. "They're doing something with the trail herd!"

"If they think they can steal all my steers—"

"No, no, it isn't that. Listen!"

Chismore and his companions were yelling like Comanches. By peering between two of the sideboards, Lona could see that the cattle were being slowly strung out along the trail leading north.

The big man at the end of the wagon evidently decided that he would have no trouble with his prisoners. He stood with his elbows resting on the end board, staring toward the cattle. Suddenly, Lona felt something under one knee, something round and hard.

The wagon spade, short-handled, heavy-bladed.

She had the spade gripped in both icy hands. She moved an inch, then a foot. Lona Waring got to her knees, stood up. With a startled grunt, the man outside the wagon reached for his guns. He was whirling—

Lona brought the flat side of the spade down with a tingling thud upon his head. His sombrero was driven over his eyes, his knees buckled. She struck him again as he went down, then leaped into the clear.

She expected to hear yells and, after that, shots from the direction of the other renegades, but when she looked in that direction she saw that they were busy lining up the steers. Lona stooped and drew out the burly man's two hog-legs. She handed one to Uncle Ike.

"It ain't as good as mine," Ike Keller snarled. "But it'll do, to plug that side winder with!"

"Don't shoot unless he starts to yell, or one of the other men rides back here!" she said. "Watch out, Uncle Ike. I'll be back."

She made it back to where she had left Geronimo, jerked the slipknot and vaulted into the saddle. A fringe of alder ran north and west along the creek. For five minutes, Lona rode furiously forward behind this cover.

Then her horse was legging it across the open prairie. Twilight was turning into dark and Lona Waring could see twinkling lights straight ahead.

When she rode up to one of the stores in Quilltown, four neatly dressed townsmen stared down from the loading platform. "Where will I find John Darcy?" the tall, brown-haired girl on the sweating cayuse demanded.

They continued to stare, then one of them said, "Darcy, ma'am? Why, I reckon he's—"

"Look, yonder come John now!" a fat man with a pencil behind his ear said. "What you want him for?"

But Lona had spotted the broad-shouldered man advancing along the high plank walk. She dug in her heels and Geronimo trotted forward.

"A man named Chismore is com-

ing here tonight, with a stampeding trail herd!" Lona cried. "I ought not to have warned you—"

"Chismore? Les Chismore?"

He didn't believe her—the fool! Lona clenched her fists. "Don't stand there like a bump on a log!" she cried. "There are four of them, and I heard—"

Suddenly, he turned and ran back up the street. Lona's cayuse walked slowly in the same direction. When John Darcy came riding out of a frame building with the sign "Livery Stable" on its gable end, Lona Waring turned Geronimo in beside his tough-looking roan.

She told him what had happened. "We meant to go through your town in spite of you," Lona said unsteadily. "I still wish we could have done it!"

He glanced sidewise at her. "I wish you could," he told her. "If it were really my town, you could drive your cows all over it!" Then his face changed, so disturbingly that Lona edged her horse away.

"So Les Chismore has come back to Quilltown!" John Darcy said. "I've been praying that he would. It was right in that saloon on the corner that he shot my dad, who believed in giving every man a chance. Well, miss, you ride back and stay at the store—"

"I certainly shan't! This is as much my fight as yours!"

How his face had changed! It was hard, set. He looked impatiently at Lona. "You'd only get in my way," he rasped. "He won't be expecting me, and I'll sure get him before one of his Rio Grande cut-throats plugs me!"

Lona caught her breath. Why, that meant that John Darcy didn't expect to come out of this fight alive! All he wanted was to send Les Chismore on ahead, along the ghost road.

"Come back!" she cried, but Darcy's fresh, fast horse was off.

She dug in her spurs and followed. The man on the roan was drawing steadily away from her. In a matter of minutes, he had vanished into the alders along the creek, and now Lona saw the cattle. They were advancing in trail formation. The moon was rising and, by its light, she could recognize the longhorn bull in the lead.

Big Blue was bawling and shaking his great head. Every few rods he paused to paw dirt on his back. And, Lona saw, there were no point riders. The outlaws were trusting the lead bull to follow the worn trail that led to Quilltown.

All these details went through her mind as if they were on a whirling endless belt. But all the time she was roweling Geronimo, urging him on in the wake of John Darcy.

"I shouldn't have told him!" she moaned. "But if I hadn't—"

No, that wouldn't have worked, either. John had to be warned. But this ride of his could end in just one way—his death.

And Lona Waring didn't want the young lawman to die. She knew that now. She had tried not to like him, but her feeling for him was drawn from her as if by a vast magnetism. Most of the men she met were middle-aged and prosaic.

John was young, and she knew that despite his aloofness, he could be exciting and a wonderful companion.

"I've got to help him!" she whispered.

But that was just to keep up her courage. She rode through the night. Interminably, the trail herd wound by. Then, ahead, she saw spurts of red fire and, next instant, the thunder of shots rolled upon her.

Lona could see four horsemen riding around like Indians, firing under the necks of their cayuses, and another man riding straight in the saddle and firing back. A cloud of dust billowed up and hid them. When it drifted aside, Lona saw that John Darcy's horse was down, then saw Darcy running, ducking. He reached the foot of a wooded knoll. In another moment he was hidden among the trees at the summit.

The renegade trail drivers had dropped off their horses and vanished into the bunch grass. They would encircle the knoll. It was only a matter of minutes till one of them would see the crouching figure of the lawman over the sights of his gun, and fire the final shot.

Lona Waring's mind was working on ball bearings. She saw John encircled, firing his last cartridge, going down, blood slowly staining his flannel shirt.

"I've got to—" she whispered.

Then it came to her. She couldn't help him by an attack from the rear. These killers were hidden, like lurking panthers, in the grass. They would pick her off all too easily. But she could drive them out! Yes, she could!

She was racing through the moonlight toward Quilltown. No use trying to raise a posse there to help John. Those plump town merchants probably didn't know how to load a gun.

The herd thinned as she neared the point. Dust rose and she saw Big Blue marching majestically forward, shaking his head, heard him bawling to the universe.

Lona rode straight at him. "Yip-ee-ee!" she yelled. "Get going, Blue! Back to Texas, you old rascal!"

She slid out the long-barreled Colt, fired into the air. Then she was beside the blue lead bull, was flailing him over the horns and eyes with her tight-gripped Stetson.

She had them turned, and Big Blue had the idea. All these weeks he had wanted to go back to the Panhandle, and now he was on his way. Nothing could stop him.

Bellowing and quite mad, the other cattle followed. Their tails stuck horizontally out behind, their heads were down, the rattle of horns and the reverberation of pounding hoofs filled the air till it seemed to froth with sound.

"Yip-ee-ee!" the girl on the panting cayuse screamed. "Texas, you mavericks. Home to the Panhandle!"

They thundered down upon the stretch of prairie surrounding the oak knoll. Before the four killers hidden in the grass had realized

what was happening, the trail herd was upon them.

A hooked-nosed man with a gun in each flailing hand ran up the incline that led to the grass. He swung up both guns and fired. But the town marshal of Quilltown had beaten him by a matter of split seconds. Darcy's right-hand gun crashed and John Darcy ran forward.

He stood looking down warily. His shoulders sagged and he turned away.

No need for a second shot. Chismore would never murder another man of good will.

The sun came up, trailing golden clouds, and Lona helped old Chickie get breakfast. Les Chismore was dead, he and his three outlaw companions. The herd had vanished into the far distance. They would slow up, somewhere on their way back to the home ranch. And she and Uncle Ike would catch up and trail along. After John Darcy had ridden away with the body of his father's murderer slung behind his saddle, Uncle Ike had promised Lona that he would go back to the ranch in the Panhandle and stay there.

"Trail driving is over, I reckon," he'd said sadly. "Well, you and me will make out, honey."

Now, Lona, helping old Chickie, sighed softly.

"I guess so," she murmured, and the old cook blinked questioningly at her. "I was just thinking aloud, Chickie," she explained. Then she added a sudden question, "Were you ever in love?"

His eyes were the eyes of an old, sagacious tortoise. He blinked and then he sighed. "Long, long ago, señorita," he said in his whispering voice. "Long ago!"

Lona stood looking at him, sympathy and understanding in her brown eyes.

She continued to stand without moving. Someone stood beside her—someone who, next moment, drew her around and looked down into her startled eyes.

"I heard," John Darcy said. "Lona—that is your name, isn't it? Lona, why did you ask him that?"

Lona knew then how a cayuse felt when it got into a panic. She whirled and looked wildly toward the wagon. He caught her, held her close.

"Why?" he demanded.

No, she didn't want to run. She just wanted to rest here, forever.

"As if you didn't know!" she whispered.

THE END.

THE SILVER CONCHA

Any hombre who's got half a brain knows that the quickest way to get a jasper's respect is to knock helt outta him.

A Two-Part Novel

Conclusion

by Richard Hill Wilkinson

III.

"So?" Jim's eyes flicked over the faces of the men behind Clark. He knew them all and they knew him. Yet there was no sign of recognition in their glances, no acknowledgment of friendship. They stood there silent, waiting, expectant.

Jim's eyes came back to the beefy visage of Clark.

"Something you wanted to see me about, Clark?"

"Wanted to see you last night. Went into town to meet you. Only, you ducked out on me."

There was open contempt, frank challenge on the big man's face now. Jim thought wearily, angrily, "Ye gods! What good will it do? What will it prove? Suppose he licks me or I lick him? Where will we be then? How much closer to saving the Concha?"

Utter, complete disgust filled him. He was here for a purpose, and that purpose did not include entertaining a bunch of thick-skulled, ignorant cowpokes by picking a fight with a bully.

He turned abruptly, his jaw line suddenly hard and his teeth bared, and glared at his uncle.

"All right, Uncle Alva, you've asked me to take over, to save the Concha. I'll do it on one condition. I want complete charge. What I say goes. No one else interferes—no one at all. Give me that authority and I'll promise to save the Concha and every other ranch here in the valley. Only, it's got to be done my way."

Alva Blaine looked at his nephew and his eyes widened a little. And then, almost imperceptibly, he seemed to droop. Jim knew then that he, too, had been waiting, hoping, believing the thing that all his men expected would happen.

Seeing this, feeling it and hating his uncle and all the others because of it, Jim said sharply, "Speak up! Make your decision now like a man, or kick me out again. Only this time, don't call me back."

Alva Blaine stiffened. He lifted his head and seemed to grow taller, and for a moment something of the old-time spirit gleamed in his eyes.

He looked past Jim into the leering face of Boris Clark, allowed his eyes to sweep briefly over the faces of the twenty old-timers who had helped him build the Concha into the biggest ranch north of Tucson, and then jerked his gaze back to Jim.

He spoke, and his voice was clear and firm.

"O. K., Jim. You win. The place is yours. Everyone takes orders from you. Let's see what you can do."

"Good. That much is settled." Jim swung around and faced the men. He felt almost lighthearted. He felt triumphant and capable of great accomplishments. He was suddenly amused at the sullen, rebellious looks that met his eyes.

"Listen, you hombres, you've heard what the setup is. Anyone who hasn't got nerve enough to stand back of me in what I plan to do, can quit now."

"And just what is this smart thing you plan to do, bub?"

It was Boris Clark, openly sneering, grimly determined not to be cheated out of his fight.

Jim took a step forward. His eyes narrowed a little. He gave Clark one swift, direct, fearless look, then swept the faces of the waiting men.

"Up to now it seems to me that you boys have been letting yourselves be run over rough-shod. Somebody's been handing you a bluff and you've been swallowing it

hook, line and sinker. The trouble is, you haven't been smart enough to do a little bluffing of your own.

"All right, right now we're playing the game Santrell's way. We're riding up there in force and telling him to quit work on his dam because we've got an injunction against such an operation. There'll be twenty of us. He won't dare refuse. So far he's been smart enough to keep inside the law. He'll want to continue that practice, so he'll be forced to stop the construction until he finds out whether or not we're bluffing. By that time, I'll have succeeded in getting the injunction."

Jim knew the minute he finished talking that he had scored a bull's-eye. There was a muttered murmur of agreement among the men. They looked at each other and nodded, and an eager light of understanding and anticipation came into their faces.

Jim felt a surge of triumph. He turned to look into the darkly scowling face of Boris Clark. He grinned:

"Save it, Clark. Your turn will come. Right now, our job is to stop that dam from being built."

Jim led his uncle Alva's twenty riders up over the ridge and across the mesa to the grove of jackpines, sycamores and live oaks where Hugo Santrell's Tomahawk outfit was located.

He was impressed by everything he saw. Everything was neat, well-kept, prosperous-looking. Waterholes were fenced in and concrete tanks had been built. The corrals and traps that they passed were all in good repair.

Sight of it all gave Jim a queer feeling. This was the way he would have run a ranch. Everything was modern, up-to-date. He peered hard at the cattle that threw up their heads at the approach of the riders. Most of them were pure-bred Herefords, yet some definitely bore the marks of mixed strains.

"Brahmas crossed with Herefords," Jim muttered. "Santrell's got the same idea that I had."

They went in under the trees. Boris Clark and the other Concha riders fanned out. Seeing this, Jim called sharply:

"Bunch up here! This isn't an attack. Bunch up!"

They moved in closer, but the formation remained. Jim didn't like it. He didn't like the looks on the faces of his men or the way they ignored his orders.

A vague feeling of apprehension beset him.

There wasn't time to dwell on possibilities. An instant later, they broke through the trees and were in the Tomahawk yard. New log buildings, all neat, well-kept and evenly spaced, were before them. The main ranchhouse was patterned after that of the Concha, only it was smaller and the veranda was deeply shaded.

Jim pulled in his pinto. A figure had risen from a chair on the porch. It was Roxie Santrell. She wore a white silk blouse and dark-brown frontier pants, and her tuian

hair hung loosely about her shoulders.

She was lovely, and in spite of himself, Jim felt his pulse beat quicken. He swore softly, without knowing why, knowing only a remote sense of shame, as though he had been caught doing something that wasn't right.

The girl had come to the edge of the veranda. She stood there looking at him, seeming neither surprised nor pleased. There was a hint of the same half-amused smile on her lips.

Jim reined his pinto up close and swept off his hat. He grinned. "Hello, there," he said. "Is your dad home?"

He tried to make his voice sound casual, friendly, and knew he'd failed.

Roxie Santrell looked at him steadily.

"I didn't think you'd do it, Jim Agassie. I didn't think you'd let them change your mind."

"Do what? Change my mind about what? I haven't changed my mind about anything." Without realizing it, he sounded defensive, and this made him angry because there was no reason why he had to sound defensive.

Roxie Santrell did not answer. Instead, she looked past him, over his head toward the ranch yard. Jim turned to follow the direction of her gaze.

Clark and his men had carefully distributed themselves about the yard. Casually, they had taken up positions near woodpiles, corrals and buildings—places that offered quick and secure shelter. They were sitting loosely in their saddles, but there was a tenseness about them, an alertness.

It was almost as if they were waiting for a signal.

Anger surged through Jim "Come in here, you guys! Ride out here in the open. Keep together!"

No one moved. The men sat slouched in their saddles, their faces expressionless, waiting.

Then Jim saw Boris Clark. Clark was close behind him, near a corner of the veranda. He'd looped his reins about the horn of his saddle and was casually rolling a cigarette. He was looking at Jim and grinning.

"Tell me what you want them to do, bub. These boys take orders from me."

"Why, you damn big lug. I'll—"

A door slammed. Heavy footfalls sounded on the veranda. Jim jerked around in his saddle.

He saw a man standing at the top of the steps. The man was slight, wiry. He had black hair, graying about the temples, a pleasant, open face. His eyes were gray. They were quick eyes, alive, probing.

He came down the steps and looked up at Jim. He smiled.

"I'm Santrell. You're Jim Agassie. At least, you answer the description. What was it you wanted, boy?"

"Nothing but a chance to talk, to see if we can't straighten things out to everyone's advantage." He looked straight into the probing

blue eyes. "You seem to think I'm here to start trouble, Mr. Santell. I'm not."

"No?" The ghost of a smile came and went on Santrell's face. He made the slightest of gestures with his hand. "You brought twenty men with you to prevent trouble. Is that right?"

Jim felt the color rushing into his face. Things weren't going the way he had planned. He didn't want trouble. Bringing the Concha punchers here was only a gesture designed to back up his bluff, to pacify his uncle's riders momentarily.

He hadn't thought that Santrell would be expecting him.

He became suddenly conscious of the girl standing on the veranda. She hadn't moved. The same mocking smile was still on her lips.

A wild, uncontrollable rage filled him. He knew what she was thinking. She was thinking he'd thrown all his convictions aside and was resorting to the methods employed by the old school, the methods that he had formerly scorned.

"Listen!" he cried in a loud voice. "I'm not here looking for trouble. That's the last thing I want. I only want to talk about the dam, to make some deal that will prevent my uncle's ranch and the ranches of his neighborhood from being caught short without water."

He heard a noise behind him. It was a sort of hissing sound, a wheezing, as though someone had been trying to hold in his feelings too long and had finally given way to the effort.

Jim jerked around in his saddle. Ten yards behind him a puncher named Greg Fletcher, one of his uncle's riders, was looking at him with an expression of complete scorn.

Vaguely, Jim became aware of other faces. Dark, scowling, accusing faces. He heard sounds then and turned his head slowly.

The yard was suddenly filled with men. Strangers. Tomahawk punchers, rugged, armed.

They had appeared from nowhere. They had emerged quietly into the sunlight and were standing there, waiting, confident and sure of themselves.

Jim felt the blood go cold in his veins. Understanding came to him in one blinding, appalling flash of light. He had been tricked, duped. This that was happening was all planned. Boris Clark and the Concha punchers had planned it. They had used him as an excuse, a decoy to lead them over here.

Why? Why had they wanted him to lead them? What part did they expect him to play in their plans? Jim didn't know. There wasn't time to think about it.

He knew only that Santrell had known of his coming and was prepared for it. Roxie had known it, too. She had tried not to believe it up to the very last, but now the facts were staring her straight in the face.

A sickening sense of rage, frustration and helplessness took hold of Jim. There was going to be a battle and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

There was going to be violence, bloodshed, murder and somehow, for some reason, he had been trapped into being responsible for it all.

He started forward, toward Boris Clark, not knowing exactly what he was going to do, but wanting to do something, anything to prevent this futile waste of human life.

The pinto had not taken two steps before someone called:

"What are we waiting for? Damn it, they think they've got us trapped. Let's show 'em!"

Then there was a shot. It was followed by another, then a volley.

A man screamed and plunged from his horse to the ground.

In the space of two clock ticks, the ranch yard became a scene of pandemonium, of wild shouts, blazing guns and horrified screams.

Instinctively, Jim flung himself from the back of the pinto. Instinctively, he jerked out his own gun. He crouched beside the steps that led up to the veranda.

The ranch yard was deserted now. Men and horses had vanished as though by magic.

Twenty feet away, a puncher lay face down in the dust. Periodically, his body gave a convulsive twist.

The air was filled with the sound of shooting. From behind every available shelter, puffs of smoke blossomed. Bullets whined and screamed overhead. Lead slammed into the bunkhouse, behind which most of the Tomahawk men had taken refuge.

Jim saw Greg Fletcher lying flat on his stomach behind a woodpile. The grizzled old puncher was sighting along the barrel of a carbine. His weathered face was set in grim, hard lines. There was a deadly gleam in his eyes.

A wild sense of rage and futility took hold of Jim.

"Stop it! Cut it out! This isn't going to get us anywhere. We'll never settle anything this way! Stop it, you fools!"

He was standing up, waving his arms wildly, shouting at the top of his lungs. Without realizing it, he started forward, out into the open.

Behind him, he heard a high-pitched voice screaming at him:

"Come back! Jim! Jim Agassie, come back here! You'll be hurt."

It was Roxie Santrell. She was calling to him desperately. She didn't want him to get hurt. She was afraid for his safety.

Vaguely, these things made an impression on Jim's mind. Vaguely, he knew a warm sense of gladness because of her concern.

But all his conscious thinking was directed toward stopping this fight, toward preventing needless murder. All sense of reason and caution left him.

"Men, listen to me! Listen—"

His words were drowned in a new, fiercer volley. He heard his name shouted hoarsely.

Then he was hit.

A searing hot iron ran across his head. Stars danced before his eyes. Comets zoomed. His senses reeled and he staggered, and one

He looked down at her. "I'm glad, Roxie, that you don't want anything to happen to me. And don't be afraid. I'm coming back, I'm coming back for you, you know."

hand went up to his head.

Far, far away, he heard the shooting, the yelling. He heard or thought he heard an agonized scream come from the lips of Roxie Santrell.

Then his knees buckled and he plunged forward. He went down, down, down, into a black, bottomless abyss.

IV.

Jim opened his eyes and found himself lying on a couch in a dimly lighted room. His head was on fire. His vision was blurred, but gradually it cleared and things took shape.

Overhead, there were open rafters. He turned his head and saw that he was in a living room. There were comfortable chairs about and a huge stone fireplace in one end.

He heard a voice and turned his head still farther. He blinked. Roxie Santrell was sitting in a chair beside the couch.

Nearby on a table were a basin of water, a bottle of antiseptic, bandages.

"What happened?"

"There was a gun fight. You were hit. We carried you in here."

"Am I hit bad?"

"No. The bullet creased your scalp. It's a clean wound. You'll be as good as new soon."

Jim stared at the ceiling for a long time. The throbbing in his head began to quiet down. The old bitterness was poison in his body.

He swung his legs to the floor and sat up. Roxie Santrell said:

"I wouldn't try sitting up just yet. You've lost a lot of blood."

"No, I'm all right." He placed his head in his hands and waited for the dizziness to pass. "Was anyone killed?" he asked, not looking up.

"No. One of your uncle's punchers was wounded. Some of our boys have taken him in town to the doctor."

Jim waited a long moment before he asked the next question. "How—who won?"

"Who did you expect would win? We were ready. We had your riders outnumbered two to one."

"Where's Clark? Where's Greg Fletcher and the others? What happened to them?"

"They quit. They ran home. The minute they saw the odds were against them, they lit out and left you here."

There was the slightest trace of scorn in her voice. He lifted his head and looked at her. She wasn't smiling now. Her blue eyes were sad, unhappy.

Suddenly, he wanted her to know about everything. He wanted her to understand how he felt. He had to make her understand.

"Listen," he began, "you've got the wrong idea. Things aren't the way you think at all."

"I know," she said. "You proved it when you tried to stop the fight."

And Jim cried inanely, "I don't mean that. I mean last night in the hotel dining room. Norma Venn's going to marry Eric Fales. She doesn't mean a thing to me."

She stared at him, and he felt the hot blood rushing into his cheeks. Ye gods, he hadn't meant to say that. She must think him crazy. She must—

But suddenly she smiled. It was a warm, wholly delighted smile.

"I'm glad," she said.

Jim reached in his pocket for the makings. He wished his head would clear entirely. He wondered if his thinking had been affected.

He didn't trust himself to believe that she was really glad because he had said that Norma Venn meant nothing to him.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Do?" He made a futile gesture, smiling bitterly. "What is there to do? Everything's over now. We've lost our only chance." He inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "I'm going back where I came from. I want no more of this business."

"You're quitting? Is that what you're trying to tell me."

"Yeah, quitting." He laughed harshly. "Give it that name if you like." And he added, "I'd be a fool not to quit. You can't lick brains with violence. The trouble is, I'm the only one on my uncle's side who seems to realize that."

"You can reach a compromise with a combination of both."

He stared at her queerly. "I don't get it."

"Didn't my father just prove it? When there was no alternative but violence, he was ready."

Jim smoked in silence. Strength was flowing back into his body. He no longer felt dizzy.

"You're trying to tell me something. What is it?"

"That you're as stubborn with your ideas of doing things as Boris Clark and his men are with theirs. To begin with, you haven't heard both sides of the story."

"Your side?"

"Yes. Did you think my father was stupid enough to start building a dam without thinking of the possibility of someone getting an injunction against him? Of course he thought of it. That dam is being built with the full permission and understanding of the government."

Jim scowled.

"Then he must have more influence than I thought."

"He has no influence at all, except that of an honest citizen who wants to be a credit to the community in which he lives. Listen, Jim Agassie, my father practically begged every rancher in the lowlands, including your uncle, to join with him in building this dam so we could all benefit together. Did you know that?"

"No," said Jim slowly. "I didn't know that. Tell me more."

"Dad realizes a whole lot more than the old-timers who were here before us, that you can't live happily in a community without having the good will of your neighbors. He tried hard to get that good will. He bent over backwards to get it. Even now he's willing to co-operate with the others on this dam proposition, only they won't listen to him."

"I would," Jim cried defensively.

"That's why I came over today."

"And brought twenty men with you." The old familiar, slightly scornful smile touched her lips for an instant. "When we heard that you were coming back, Jim Agassie, we were all glad. We knew all about you. We knew your ways of doing things were the modern ways, the methods to which we ourselves subscribed.

"We hoped you would be the link that would bring about an amicable understanding between our faction and that of your uncle. Then we heard that you were on your way here with twenty armed men at your back. What would you have thought if you had been in our position?"

Jim checked his cigarette halfway to his lips. He saw it now. He saw the whole diabolical plan behind Boris Clark's enthusiastic agreement to his suggestion.

Boris Clark knew that Jim would want to make a peaceful settlement. He knew that Santrell was depending upon Jim to do just that. And Clark figured that if, somehow, he could get Jim to lead an armed band into the Tomahawk yard, Santrell would realize that Jim had changed his ideas.

A fierce anger stirred Jim's blood. He laughed, and the sound wasn't pleasant to hear.

Roxie Santrell went on, and there was a queer intenseness to her voice now:

"Human nature doesn't change, Jim. Your uncle's punchers are all old-timers. All their lives they've known and understood only one way of doing things. When Boris Clark beat you up that day five years ago, he was talking in the language they understood and approved. Until you recapture their respect, you or we won't have their co-operation or the co-operation of any of the other old-time ranch owners in the valley."

Jim was grinning now. It was a cold, hard grin.

"I get it," he said softly. "The only way I can get these old-timers to string along with me is to knock hell out of Boris Clark."

He rose. He picked up his hat and started for the door.

"Jim!"

She was on her feet. She was coming after him. Her eyes were wide and suddenly frightened.

"Well?" He stopped and looked at her.

"Jim, I didn't mean— Oh, Jim, please! I don't want anything to happen to you."

"You don't?" He laughed suddenly, and momentarily the hardness left him and a warmth stole through his veins.

He placed a hand on either of her shoulders. He looked down into her upturned face. "I'm glad of that, Roxie Santrell. I'm glad that you don't want anything to happen to me, but I'm more glad still that you want me to have the respect of my neighbors."

"I do, Jim! I do! Only, it doesn't seem right. I don't know what to say. I'm confused and afraid."

"There's no need to be. None at all. I'm coming back, you know.

I'm coming back, for you."

"Please, oh, please come back, Jim. I'll be waiting for you. No matter what happens. No matter what you are or what people think, I'll be waiting for you."

He kissed her then, lightly, tenderly, holding her close to him for one brief, glorious instant. Then he held her off and looked deep into her eyes.

"You see? Now I've some unfinished business to attend to. Both here and at my uncle Alva's Silver Concha Ranch."

They were all there waiting for him—nineteen of them.

They were squatting in the sun near the bunkhouse. Boris Clark was there, hunkered down, sucking on a cigarette.

They watched Jim ride into the yard. They said nothing. From the corner of his eye, Jim saw the ranchhouse door open. He knew that his uncle had come out and was standing on the veranda, watching.

But he neither turned his head nor stopped. He rode on toward the bunkhouse, and as he approached, Boris Clark rose, hitching at his belt, tossing away his cigarette.

Jim smiled to himself. They knew this was going to happen. Somehow, they had sensed it. They had been waiting.

Matter-of-factly, Jim stepped from his saddle. He slapped the pinto and watched it amble away. He turned then to face Boris Clark, and he was smiling.

He said, "Unbuckle your gun, Clark, and toss it to your gang of cronies."

Boris Clark hesitated. He cast one quick look at the men squatting by the bunkhouse. They looked at him expectantly, confidently.

He shrugged, unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it toward Greg Fletcher.

Jim nodded and heaved his own belt and gun in the same direction.

"Anything goes, Clark?"

"Why not?" The big man's eyes gleamed wickedly. "If you think that beating I gave you five years ago was tough, you'll wish to Heaven you'd never come back this time."

"No," said Jim quietly. "This time it's going to be the other way around. Everything's changed, Clark. Brute force doesn't count much any more. It's science that's on top, whether you're raising cattle or fighting. I'll show you what I mean."

And Jim Agassie stepped forward. He drew back his right arm and struck with his left. The blow caught Boris Clark flush on the mouth. It was a powerful blow. It drew blood. It rocked the big man's head.

But it didn't even daze him.

For one brief, astonished moment Clark stood still and stared. Then he roared like a bull and drove forward. He lowered his head and flayed out with his huge, hamlike fists.

Jim stepped nimbly to one side. With scarcely any effort at all, he avoided both those flaying fists. And as Clark's body lunged past, he

drove two quick blows into the side of the other's head.

It was like striking rock. And, suddenly, the thought flashed across Jim's mind that Boris Clark wasn't all bluff. He had the strength of a steer, the hardness of granite.

It was going to take all the scientific skill and strength at Jim's command to bring this man to his knees. And if one of those terrible sledge-hammer blows connected—

The cowpunchers were on their feet now. They had formed in a circle. They were yelling, shouting and hurling advice at the two combatants.

Boris Clark checked his forward plunge and whirled. His face was terrible to see. He didn't stop and stare this time. He charged again. He lowered his head and came plunging forward like an enraged bull.

Again Jim avoided the sledge-hammer blows. Again he struck out and connected. And again the blows seemed to have no effect whatever on the other man.

Clark spun on his heels with surprising swiftness. He chopped downward with a hamlike fist. Jim snapped his head to one side, barely in time to prevent his skull from being crushed.

The blow glanced off his shoulder and he felt a paralyzing pain shoot down through his right arm.

It was then that he realized what he was up against. One more blow like that and he would be helpless.

He let go with his left fist. The bunched knuckles ripped open a gash in the big man's cheek. Jim struck again, this time directing his blow toward Clark's left eye.

His fist connected. The eye grew red and almost at once began to swell.

Clark opened both his arms wide. He came forward now with his head thrown back, his intent obvious. He meant to inclose Jim in a powerful hug, squeeze the breath from his lungs, crack his ribs.

Instead of stepping back to avoid the encounter, as Clark expected, Jim moved swiftly forward.

Once, twice, three times, he drove his fists into the big man's stomach. He heard the big man grunt, and quickly stepped back.

Jim himself was breathing hard now. He was tiring more quickly than he expected. He remembered the wound in his head, remembered he must have lost a lot of blood. Perhaps he should have waited—

Too late now to think of that. For one brief instant Clark doubled over, clutching his stomach.

Jim moved in again, driving his knotted right fist toward the big man's other eye. A queer, primitive satisfaction ran through him as he felt his knuckles driving into the flesh around Clark's eye.

The shouts and yells of the spectators were a dim background of sound. Vaguely, Jim heard his own name called. Vaguely, he knew that the sentiment of at least part of the crowd had swung in his direction.

The knowledge gave him renewed energy. Clark was coming at him again, slowly now, warily, weaving back and forth, his arms crooked, held at hip length, fingers twitching. His left eye was completely closed, his right swelling rapidly.

He lunged when he was only a foot away.

Jim stepped back, but his reactions had slowed. Clark's fist grazed his cheek. Stars danced. For a moment his senses reeled. As from a great distance, he saw Clark's suddenly leering, triumphant face only an inch or two from his own.

Desperately he struck out, at the same time dancing to one side. He felt the wind of the blow as Clark's fist smashed at him again.

Then, suddenly, Jim's senses cleared. He drove a hard right straight into the ugly leering face. The big man gasped, tried to turn, momentarily lost his balance.

Remembering the weakness he had found in the big man's stomach, Jim stepped in quickly and began battering at the flabby paunch.

Gasps came from above him. This time he didn't step away. He stayed there, driving blow after blow into that vulnerable spot.

He kept it up until strength left him, until he no longer had the force or power to deliver another blow. He felt Clark's hand on his shoulders, but he was too exhausted to back away.

He dropped to his knees, slipped to one side, breathing hard. He tried to steel himself for a hard driven boot, for the weight of Clark's hurtling body.

But nothing happened. After a moment he turned his head. Two feet away Clark was sprawled out flat on his stomach. His face was a torn, bleeding mass of torn flesh. He lay still, not moving.

Jim thought with a surge of incredible triumph, "It's over! I've licked him! He was out minutes ago. I was holding him up."

He struggled to his knees. Above him, he heard the roar of voices. Eager, willing hands helped him to his feet. He was supported on both sides. He heard his name repeated over and over again. He smiled feebly, looking into the faces that surrounded him.

And what he saw in those faces was worth a dozen beatings that he might have suffered at the hands of Boris Clark.

"All right," he said. "All right." He shook off the supporting hands. "That job's done. We've got other things to attend to now. Only now we'll do them my way."

"You bet!" "Anything you say, Jim." "From now on, you're giving the orders."

Jim saw his uncle Alva coming across the yard. The old man was walking with a new springiness. His shoulders were thrown back. There was a bright, eager look in his eyes. It was almost as if he had grown ten years younger.

"Jim!" he exclaimed. "Jim!" He held out his hand. He looked into the younger man's eyes. "Jim,

it had to be. You know that. There was no other way possible."

"Sure," said Jim. "Sure, I understand, Uncle Alva."

"Come into the house, boy. We've a lot to talk about. From now on the Silver Concha is going to be run your way."

Jim shook his head. "No. Not now. Later, perhaps." He picked up his hat and moved off toward the pinto. There was a warm wave of feeling running through him. He was smiling and his eyes were bright.

He swung into the saddle and looked back toward the cluster of men. "Right now I've some unfinished business to attend to. Something that can't wait. See you later."

The pinto leaped into a run at the touch of Jim's spurs. Jim could almost feel the touch of Roxie Santrell's warm, eager lips as he rode through the trees.

THE END.

ZUNI, NEW MEXICO

I have been thinking of those who are
Under foreign stars, so very far
From their own firesides—yesterday,
Today, and tomorrow, the trail roams
All over the world, and above it
And below it— Some will never again
See their homes— And I wonder
If the Zunis are not right when they say:
Nothing dies, only the house is changed.

GRACE MEREDITH.

THE OUTLAWS

by George Cory Franklin

Comes a time in an hombre's life when he gets plumb tired of letting a filly lead him by the nose.

THE blond curls of the slender girl on the outlaw black shook convulsively as the doors of Chute 2 swung open and gave her a clear view of the arena. In spite of her effort to relax and ride naturally, her muscles stiffened under the impact of the twisting buck with which Black Duke began his star performance. From the high point of the arched back she was unable to see the massive head of the animal as he catapulted off the ground, swapping ends in the air, but as he hit the dirt, she got a glimpse of the white jaws bared like those of a killer wolf.

Bernice Miller raked with one spur. "I hope the judges saw that," she thought, as she took the jar and swung easily into the running buck which was Duke's preliminary to the real test of her skill and staying power.

Black Duke was finish horse for the women contestants of the famous Ski Hi Stampede, and if Bernice could last the required number

of seconds, she had better than an even chance of winning, although dark-eyed Rita Taylor might tie her in points, providing she made a good ride on the Queen of Sheba, the sorrel mare that Bernice had ridden the day before. Bill Wing had told Bernice that the Queen was almost as tricky as Duke, although not so powerful, and while Bill hadn't said so, his remark had implied that Rita was not likely to clear that barrier.

So far as Bernice was concerned, there was much more involved in this contest than the title or the price. Until now, the relationship between Bernice and Bill had been marred by frequent quarrels, although Bernice had to admit that Bill had been devoted to her and very patient. Since the day when he had whipped Zeke Slocum for pulling her curls when teacher's back was turned, Bernice had but to turn her head to find Bill ready to protect her. Such constancy and devotion had deserved much better treatment than Bernice had deigned to concede, and she knew it.

The strange quirk in a woman's heart that demands obstacles to inspire romance, had raised an unbeatable hazard for Bill.

"Why don't you go out with some of the other girls, at least part of the time?" she had asked impulsively. "The boys all take it for granted that you're my steady, so they never ask me to go to a party. Besides, I'm tired of being babied all the time. Suppose I do get hurt a little? I can take it."

This outburst had come four years before, when she was sixteen. A few days later, when she had fallen off a footbridge and was about to be dashed to pieces on the jagged rocks of Roaring Creek, Bill's pony had come suddenly out of the willows. The loop of his rawhide rope had snapped about her shoulders, and the well-trained cow horse had kept the rope tight while Bill had come, hand over hand, to her rescue. Bill was only eighteen at the time, but already he was becoming the expert horse handler he was later conceded to be.

Not until Rita Taylor, daughter of a rich cattleman from Arizona, had come with her father to live in the San Luis Valley had Bill ever shown interest in any other girl. For a while Bernice had welcomed the sense of freedom, but today, she was realizing what a comfort it would have been to have Bill out there among the pickup men ready to come to her, instead of being seated in the Taylor box, apparently giving the Arizona beauty his undivided attention.

The plunging demon beneath her was giving Bernice very little time in which to think about anything but sticking on. Any horse she ever had ridden before seemed like a woolly lamb in comparison. Duke had been tops for the men broncbusters until this year, when the judges had decided that the five-year-old horse was slipping. But Bernice knew now the judges had been mistaken and that Duke was still about the toughest nut in the bag.

Bernice was sure that she had ridden him more than the required

time, but he was showing no signs of weakening. On the contrary, it seemed to her aching muscles that the terrific pounding was increasing in speed and force. She heard the crack of the pistol, signaling that the ride was over, and saw the pickup men start toward her. Duke saw them, too, and his experience in the arena enabled him to avoid their frantic efforts to get hold of the halter rope. Three attempts by Shorty Workman to stop Duke failed, and when, in desperation he tried to crowd in close enough to lift Bernice from the saddle, Duke whirled away, leaving Shorty's arm encircling nothing more than thin air.

Every horseman in the grandstand knew that Bernice could not stick much longer. She knew it better than anyone. Her legs were numb and her back seemed to be breaking. The salty taste of blood from a cut in her lip warned her that she was hurt, and she could no longer hear the roars of applause from the grandstand. Duke made a grapevine twist that brought the Taylor box into her line of vision, and she saw that Rita was alone now. Then, as Duke whirled again toward the stables, she saw Red Flash, Bill's roan, coming like the wind, his long mane standing back over his neck to touch against Bill, as he leaned far over the racer's neck.

Confidence that Bill would save her, enabled Bernice to swing loose in the saddle and withstand the impact of the next two jumps. Up came her left boot to rake the rigid muscles of the outlaw's neck. Duke, surprised that any rider could take the best he had to give and come back for more, suddenly jerked his head up and stopped. He stood perfectly still for a moment, then turned his head, smelled Bernice's boot and nickered.

The sign was unmistakable. Bernice actually had ridden the horse out. Amazement spread over Bill's face. He made a quick gesture toward Shorty.

"Don't crowd him," he said. "Unless I'm badly mistaken, Bernice has broken her a horse." Bill's judgment of animals and his patience, even under such circumstances, impressed Bernice instantly, but even more outstanding was his gallantry in refusing to mar her triumph by a show of lifting her from the saddle.

Bernice stroked the neck of the great horse. "Don't take it so hard, Duke," she murmured. "It had to come sometime. Just be glad that the one who rode you to a finish was human." Her hearing was clear once more, her well-trained muscles relaxed and her heart very tender toward Bill. She didn't care if Rita and the cheering crowd in the grandstand did see her motion to him. "Come up closer," she invited with a gentleness she had never shown until now. "I want you to do something for me."

Surprised admiration shone in Bill's dark eyes. "What happened, Berny? Did you get hurt?"

Bernice shook her head. She knew now that what she wanted more than anything else was the

protection of Bill's arms. To lay her head against his shoulder, let the repentant tears wash away the memories of her stubbornness, and soothe the fear that her indifference had killed Bill's love for her. "I want to buy Duke. He will never buck with me again. Will you see the man who owns him and close the deal?"

"Sure. Duke has never been hurt and will make you a wonderful horse. He's ruined anyway, so far as the show business is concerned."

Tears welled up in Bernice's blue eyes. "I suppose you'll think I've gone loco, Bill, but I'm sorry for Duke. He's a grand sport, and in spite of the terrible reputation he has made for himself, he's a square shooter."

"O. K.," Bill said gently. "Pull his head around toward Flash. If he's given up, he'll go along with him."

Bernice did as Bill directed, and felt a great sense of relief when Duke sighed and walked off. Bill grunted approvingly. "He's through all right. Let's ride over past the grandstand, so that everyone can see that you have ridden him out."

Bernice was conscious of the enthusiastic clapping and yelling, but her eyes were drawn to the Taylor box. She was fascinated by the determination she saw on Rita's face. "It's going to take as much courage and grit to hold out against that girl as it did to ride Duke," she decided. "The worst of it is, I have had my chance and muffed it. Now I know that I would rather have been killed by Duke than to lose Bill." She glanced up at him and saw that he was looking directly at Rita. The expression on his face was that of a poker player who has filled his hand and is unable to entirely conceal his satisfaction. "You are sure popular, Berny," he told her. "Every cowman in the valley knows that you have done the impossible—broken a spoiled horse in one ride."

"But, Bill, he isn't spoiled, and if you can buy him for me I'll break him to do everything that Flash can do."

"You can do it if anyone can, Berny. Let's ride back to the chutes and I'll go talk with the man who owns him."

Duke had never been taught anything except to lead, but he appeared to want to please Bernice who mused that the horse was in pretty much the same position that she was, in trying to adapt herself to a new way of doing things. Duke moved awkwardly, uncertain of himself, never sure that he was doing right, very much as Bernice was feeling her way back over a trail across which her willfulness had placed many obstacles.

As the couple approached the chutes, the handlers raised their hats and stood bareheaded, murmuring congratulations. Fred Groom, who was managing the rodeo this year, rode out to meet them. "That was the greatest show that has ever been put on in this park, Berny. I'm asking you to lead the grand march with me tonight."

A half-hour before, Bernice would have accepted the invitation without hesitation. Now she was in doubt as to the reply she should make. There had been a time when Bill would have said, "Nothin' doin', old-timer, Berny is going with me." She glanced at him, but got no hint of what he was thinking. "Probably he has asked Rita," she decided, and smiled bravely at Fred. "Sure, I'll go with you and limp through a march, but don't expect me to dance much."

"Of course you'll be able to dance tonight. I'll reserve a room for you at the hotel. You can go over there, have a hot bath and rest until time to dress. How will that do?"

"It will help a lot." She held out her hand. "Good-by, Bill, and thank you for helping me."

The crowd applauded again that evening when they saw that Bernice was to lead the grand march with Groom, but it afforded her little comfort. Neither Bill nor Rita was in the hall and, to Bernice, the only explanation was that they were in Bill's car, parked somewhere among the shadows, preferring their own company to that of the dancers. Her suspicion was confirmed when, shortly after supper, the missing couple appeared and Rita came directly to Bernice. "I want to tell you that, as far as I am concerned, the contest is over," she began. "You deserve the title." She let her voice fall to a whisper. "Besides, Bill asked me not to ride." She gave a triumphant smile. "We are going to be married in the fall."

The sudden numbness of Bernice's lips made it impossible for her to make an audible reply. She held out her hand in a gesture that the bystanders thought was the gracious thing for the winning contestant to make, and a ripple of applause ran through the crowd. Rita, always ready to turn everything to her own advantage, bowed to the cowboys.

"It's not easy to admit that you have been beaten, even by such an exhibition as we saw today," she said. "I have been working toward this for months. I could have ridden Duke—I know I could—but Bernice got the breaks by riding first." For Bernice's ears alone she added, "Besides, I am very well satisfied. I'd rather have Bill than all the rest of the world."

The bright sunlight of a perfect summer morning brought no joy to Bernice. She was sore physically from the ride of the day before, and her heart could find no comfort in the news that Bill had bought Duke and would bring him out to her that morning. Something of the same spirit that had sustained her during the last moments of her dramatic ride came to her now. She reminded herself, "It seemed as though I just couldn't stick another second, but I did, and when things appeared the blackest, Duke quit."

She dressed with more care than usual and was resting in a hammock on the shady front porch when Bill rode up on Duke, leading another horse.

"How do you like him?" she asked. "Did he pitch any?"

"Not a buck jump. He has a fast running walk that you'll like. You sure broke him plenty. All there is to do now is to teach him, and he'll learn fast. See, he is beginning to neck-rein already." Bill turned Duke around and back under gentle pressure. Bernice came closer and put one arm around the animal's neck, pulling his head down to her. Duke pressed his nostrils against her neck and gulped the scent, then nickered gently.

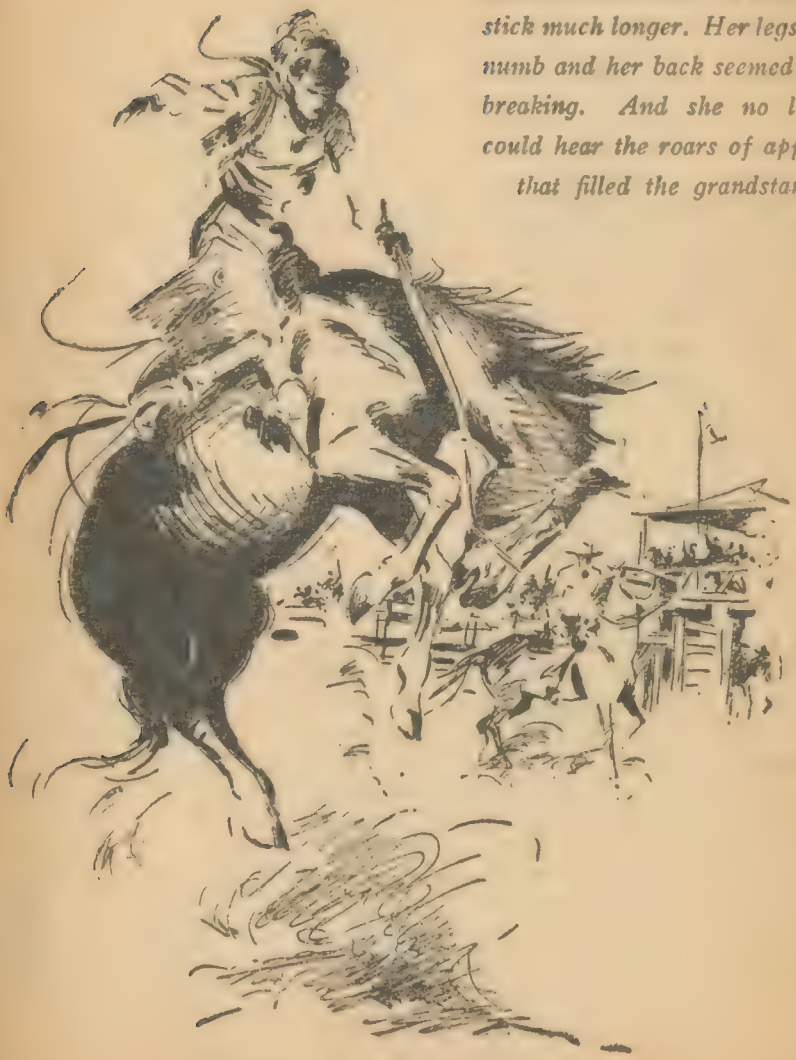
Bill laughed, "The daggoned old pie biter, he's tellin' you that he's goin' to be a pet from here out. You had a good hunch when you decided to buy him."

Bernice made no reference to Rita, or to the secret she had confided about the wedding. She was smart enough to know that if she brought that up now, it would only strengthen Bill's loyalty to Rita. She did not even invite him into the house, and while Bill was changing his saddle to the horse he had brought along, she led Duke into the stable. When she came out, Bill was riding away down the lane without even waiting to say "good-by," and it seemed to Bernice as though all her hopes for happiness went with him.

During the next two months, Bernice put in a great deal of time teaching Duke to do the work of a cow horse. The big black responded to kindness. He soon learned to eat candy from her hand and insisted on searching Bernice's pockets for the piece she hid there for him to find. Under her patient tutelage, he learned to hold a rope tight until she signaled him to slack it, to stop instantly on the pressure of the bit and to stand with the reins down.

Bernice was learning, too. Her stubborn willfulness had been severely jarred the day she had broken Duke, and the gentleness she exercised in teaching the great horse, became a part of her. During this period she did not hear directly from Bill. Friends told her that he and Rita were being seen together constantly, and that the wedding was to be immediately after the fall roundup, which was the big event of the year in the San Luis Valley. The cattle that had been ranging during the summer were gathered in one of the open parks of the upper Rio Grande. Bernice had gone every year with her father since she was big enough to ride alone, and always before, Bill had been her companion. This year she had to swallow her pride and fight down the fear that the cattlemen would pity her, before she could bring herself to the point of going with the outfit.

The Miller wagon camped at the narrows below Wagon Wheel Gap, the first night out, and just at sundown Bernice saw the elaborate outfit of the Taylors roll in. The wagon, which was fitted with all sorts of modern conveniences, was drawn by four sleek black Missouri mules. The six cowboys who rode for Taylor were all young men, mounted on handsome horses, their



Bernice knew that she could not stick much longer. Her legs were numb and her back seemed to be breaking. And she no longer could hear the roars of applause that filled the grandstand.

saddles the finest made and their bits and spurs inlaid with silver.

Bernice felt a sense of relief when she saw that Rita had not accompanied her father, but this was dulled by the thought that perhaps she was staying at home to prepare for the wedding. Not long after, Bill's neat pack outfit and four riders jogged into the park. Bill stopped beside the Miller wagon, after directing his foreman to go on above the Gap and make camp. "I'll be along pronto," he told his men.

Bernice's father voiced his dissatisfaction with brutal frankness. "Why don't you camp here, Bill? The grass is good, our cook is throwing a swell feed together and Berny ain't exactly poison, even if you can't see anything but the glitter of Taylor's layout."

For a second the old temper flared up in Bernice. "Why can't dad be more tactful? If he had only kept still, perhaps Bill might have decided to stay for a little visit." She dared not look at Bill, but she felt the resentment in his excuse. "I've got to make every minute count," he told Miller. "I'm in a hurry to get back to the valley as soon as I can. I'm only going to stay long enough to get my riders located."

Bernice decided he was in a hurry because the date for the wedding had been moved up. "Don't mind dad's joking, Bill. Everybody admires the Taylor outfit. They do put a swell-looking wagon on the range."

The change in Bernice was too marked to be overlooked. Bill hesitated a moment, as if unable to decide whether he dared to follow his inclination or not, then he stepped off his horse. "Well," he said, "I can eat supper and then ride on to where my boys will be camped."

"That's fine, Bill," Bernice told him. "I want you to see Duke perform."

Bill walked beside Bernice to within a few yards of where a dozen or more horses were grazing. Bernice signaled him to stop. "Let's wait here," she proposed, and made a sucking noise with her lips. Instantly, Duke raised his head and turned toward her. "Come here, Duke," she ordered. The former outlaw nickered softly and trotted to her, poking his nose into the pocket of her blouse.

The boyish expression of pleasure Bernice knew so well spread over Bill's face. "Gee, Berny, that's great! I knew he'd be a pet, but I never expected to see him do that."

"I want you to see him cut cattle, too, and he's the best rope horse on the Flying M."

Bill seemed to have forgotten his anxiety to overtake his outfit. He stayed until late and it was only when the cowboys had put away their mouth organs and Berny had laid her guitar aside that he got up to go. "I haven't had such a good time in months," he admitted. "Perhaps we'll have a chance for a ride together before I leave."

"I hope so, Bill. I've missed the old times."

Bill let his eyes cling to Bernice's

for a moment, then setting his lips with determination, he stepped into the saddle, waved, and cantered away.

The second day of the roundup, Rita drove up to the camp with some friends who had come from Arizona to attend her wedding. Bill and Bernice had been paired off that day by the boss of the roundup and sent to South Clear Creek valley to drag the richest part of the upper Rio Grande range. "You'll gather around a thousand head," he told them, "more cattle than any two riders can handle, but I'll send help up there as soon as the men get back from Crooked Creek."

In spite of her failure to win Bill back, Bernice felt a thrill of happiness when she swung up on Duke, with the knowledge that for one day at least, she and Bill would be alone together. Bill was riding Flash. He held him at a respectful distance until Bernice had turned Duke around a time or two, warmed him up a little and then cantered back to make a sensational one-jump stop. She glanced at the astonished faces of the cowboys. "Why the big surprise?" she joked. "Don't you believe me when I say this horse is broken?"

"All the same," Grom grumbled, "don't trust him too far. Once an outlaw, always dangerous."

Bill and Bernice had been gone several hours when Rita and her friends arrived at the roundup camp. The moment Rita learned where the couple had gone, she ordered her father's foreman to saddle a gaited horse for her and followed them.

It had been a free, happy day for Bernice as well as for Bill. She had laughed at the antics of a fat yearling as it had rollicked away in a mock stampede, and had enjoyed the fast action in a mad dash to turn back a stubborn cow. At noon they lunched beside a clear mountain stream, from which Bill had caught half a dozen trout that he roasted on a flat rock and seasoned with salt from a nearby salting ground.

By midafternoon they had cleaned the upper portion of the valley and were forming the cattle into a semblance of a trail herd. A number of the older steers had not seen a man all summer. These were wild and spoofy. Bill crossed over to caution Bernice, "Don't get too close to that brindle three-year-old with the long horns," he warned. "His eyes are green and it wouldn't take much to make him show fight."

Bernice nodded agreement obediently. "I'll be careful, Bill. This has been too wonderful a day to have it marred by an accident." Bill turned away, and Bernice acknowledged with a sinking heart that now there was no hope of winning him back. She had had her chance. Bill's loyalty would hold him to Rita no matter how much he might realize the happiness he was tossing aside.

Tears welled up in her eyes, blinding her to danger. She could not see to guide Duke away from a threat that one of the more experi-

enced cow horses would have scented and been quick to avoid. Duke, having been used exclusively for rodeo purposes, did not know the meaning of the smell thrown off by an angry steer. Indistinctly, Bernice saw, through the veil of tears, a rider approaching, but it was not until she heard the high-pitched strident voice that she recognized Rita. "So that's the sort of sport you are!" Rita taunted. "All this talk I've heard about the high sense of honor that you and Bill are supposed to have was all bunk."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about," Bernice defended. "If you're accusing Bill of trifling, you're silly. He hasn't done or said anything to make you jealous."

"Jealous?" Rita said scornfully. "I never saw the man yet who could make me jealous, but you knew you were poaching when you consented to come up here alone with him today. Maybe I won't tell Bill off when I can get to him."

Bernice managed to keep her temper. She replied icily, "It must be you don't trust Bill very much. If a man loved me the way he would have to before I'd marry him, I wouldn't be afraid of any woman on earth."

The fancy-gaited horse Rita was riding pawed the ground nervously and snorted. From across the herd Bill's voice reached them above the bawling cattle. "Go back!" he yelled, frantically waving his arm toward the north side of the valley.

"Go back nothing, you crazy fool!" Rita screeched. "I came here for you and I'm going to take you back with me."

Bernice, being in a calmer state of mind, was able to understand what Bill meant. She turned to look, and saw that the brindle steer had broken away from the line and was facing toward Rita, whose anger had attracted the animal as a danger to be attacked. Bernice tightened the bridle reins. Duke obediently backed up, leaving Rita in the danger spot. Bill was forcing his way slowly through the cattle, but Bernice saw plainly that he could not get there in time to save Rita. For one weak moment, the thought of letting the girl reap the result of her folly tempted her. All Bernice had to do was sit still —the steer would solve her problem for her. Self-interest argued that this was none of her affair, anyway. Then her self-control exerted its influence and aroused the spirit that had made it possible for her to ride Duke to a finish. Already the steer was plunging directly toward the spirited horse that fear had made unmanageable. Rita had recognized her danger at last and was attempting to rein the horse out of the way, but her efforts only served to confuse him still more.

Fully aware that she was risking her life to save Rita's, Bernice turned Duke toward the rapidly closing space and spurred him. Duke sprang bravely into the breach and took the terrific blow on his right shoulder. Above the heads

of the milling cattle, Bernice had a momentary glimpse of Bill's white face. It comforted her to think the expression in his eyes was the same as it had been the day when he had rescued her from drowning. That was all, as far as Bernice was concerned, until she dreamed she was in a boat gently rocking over the waves. Then she remembered, and wondered if Duke had been killed. She opened one eye a little. Bill's face was just above hers. She was riding on Flash cradled in Bill's arms, Duke trotting beside her. She could hear the cattle bawling and see the tops of cowboy hats as the men worked to hold the cattle in line. She moved into a more comfortable position. "What happened?" she asked.

"You saved Rita's life at the risk of your own, but when she saw me pick you up in my arms she swallowed her head and accused us of staging a phony. I tried to tell her that if you had been riding any other horse but Duke, you could never have forced it to face a mad steer, but Duke didn't know what danger he was running into. Rita got mad and threw my ring at me. She's burnin' the trail back to camp and the man she drove up with. They were engaged before she came to live in the valley, and I guess she was looking for an excuse to give me the brush-off. Anyhow, she looked relieved when I told her that you were the only girl I ever really loved."

With her head nestled against Bill's shoulder, Bernice could feel the steady throb of his heart. She stroked his tanned face with her hand. "It took an outlaw horse, an outlaw steer and a jealous girl to teach us, Bill. Now, let me get on Duke. The cowboys know that I'm awake, and I don't want them to be always throwing it up to us that they saw our first kiss."

THE END.

LET'S PLAY CHECKERS

by Millard Hopper

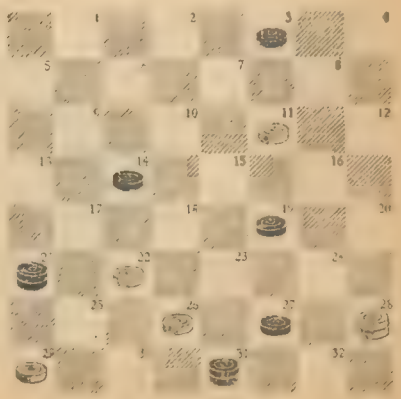
World's Unrestricted Checker Champion

Millard Hopper is well known to the checker-playing world. He is the author of several books on the game and has given numerous exhibitions, sometimes playing as many as fifty opponents at one time. He is at present giving checker demonstrations at the various army camps and U. S. O. units, and has arranged with the editorial staff of Romantic Range to conduct a friendly checker department for the men in service as well as the folks at home.

One of the most interesting oddities that ever occupied the Hall of Checker Fame, was the mysterious "Ajeeb," the checker-playing automaton. This was a leading attraction for many years at the old Eden Musee on West 23rd Street, New York City.

Many of the older generation will recall visiting this famous wax museum and watching this phenomenal robot as it defeated player after player from all points of the compass.

I was just a youngster when my



White to move and win.

father first took me to view the wonders of this museum, and I can recall the awe and amazement that gripped me as I watched this giant figure of a Moor with staring eyes and heavy beard, sitting with crossed legs, facing a checkerboard on which rested queer-looking little checkers resembling pawns.

Suddenly, the turbanned figure would slowly lean forward, one of the giant hands would reach out and the fingers would close on one of the pieces and move it across the squares. If you cheated or made a wrong move, the figure nodded its massive head and with one stroke swept the men from the board.

Somehow, my childhood memories of this figure and the impressions it gave me, still hang on in spite of the fact that years later I was introduced to Dr. August Schaefer, the unseen brains of the baffling Ajeeb.

Dr. Schaefer has long since passed on, and Ajeeb is probably gathering dust in some old attic or storage room. Ajeeb may have supplied the glamour, but the skill was Dr. Schaefer's. There could never be a truly mechanical checker-playing figure, for the combination of moves on the checkerboard are too numerous to count. Time may erase the memories of Ajeeb, but the beautiful strategies and masterpieces of checkers will go on as long as the game is played.

Undoubtedly, you have played checkers at some time or other, but probably you played as the majority do, without studying your moves and like many more, missed entirely its interesting and fascinating features.

If you really want to gain a true insight into this game simply set up your men as shown in the diagram on page 120.

It does not look as though White has much chance of winning, but he has and that's what makes the game intriguing.

Here's how White can score that win. 26-23, 19-26, 29-25, 21-30, 28-32, 30-25, (forced) 32-21, 31-26, 22-17, 14-18, 11-7, 3-10, 17-14, 10-17, 21-30, and White wins neatly.

And in case you think that was just an exception, look at this one: Place White men on square 19, 26, 27, and 32. Black men on 6, 11, 14, and King on 18.

It's White's turn to move and most players would rush to swap off the King on square 18, by moving 27-23, but instead, play 19-15, forcing 11-16, then continue 26-23, Black jumping 18-11. Then 23-19, and White gains a startling win that should convince anyone that checkers is a masterful game of skill.

* * * * * * * * *

Birth numbers and the stars above reveal your fate in life and love.

by Shawn Arlow

NOVEMBER — SCORPIO — MARS—NUMBER 11 or 2

THE S. A. usually associated with the Scorpio-Number 11 girl is not limited to sex appeal—it means that the Scorpio girl is secretive and aggressive. And in some cases, the S. A. can mean self-aggrandizement. The happiness of the Scorpio girl depends upon her motivation. Being a realist, of course, she thinks of herself, but being wise, she also understands that service to others brings a greater reward in the long run.

She is a gambler only when she is pretty sure the odds are in her favor. She does not take desperate chances, especially in love. Love to her must be more than emotion. It must have a solid foundation, for this girl does think about tomorrow. And she usually puts away for a rainy day. Sometimes, the fear of tomorrow's troubles makes her worrisome. It is a bad habit to get into. She must try to get the most out of today and let tomorrow, in the general sense, take care of itself. There is not much pleasure in the attentions of her man tonight, if she worries whether he will love her next week. Next week's love often depends a lot on her reactions to tonight. She should remember that.

One excellent trait of the Scorpio girl is her loyalty to people rather

than to ideals. If she really cares for you, there is little danger of her turning against you without sufficient reason. She is often misjudged because she is not easily swayed by emotions of the moment. Some call her cold, but she has a fire of her own which can be banked for a long time for a secret purpose, only to burst forth with flaming heat when the drafts of affection are opened.

There is something of the poet in her, and when truly energized, she can reach to the heights and express the glory of romantic bliss. Her response to two men are never the same. She responds in accordance with the background and the motive of the man. There is a psychic sensitivity about her, which tells her if a man is real or synthetic. She is not one to be easily fooled by big talk. She feels, rather than listens.

Her negative quality is fear, mainly of accident and deceit. Sickness scares her. She believes that illness is caused by her own neglect. Never ask her to expose herself to germs, even those of a cold. She can't help that. It is not wise to chide her about it.

There has to be a vital emergency to make her show her true courage and strength. For months the man she loves might think she is a timid soul, and then some afternoon, they go riding together. They rest beneath a cottonwood. He

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Send this coupon to Romantic Range—Lariat of Love—122 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. Inclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. You will receive a personal BRAND OF FATE, showing your lucky star, lucky number and combination; also the names of the Western States most favorable to you, your lucky hour on the Clock of Romance, your fortunate hours, dates, months and years and your traits—also how to determine harmony between you and your sweetheart or friend and how to make your name lucky. Each BRAND OF FATE is personally prepared in accordance with your own birthdate.

November Issue, 1944 Lariat of Love

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lays his head in her lap and closes his eyes. Suddenly, a rattlesnake appears beside him. But the Scorpio girl does not faint or scream to make the man move and perhaps get bitten. Slowly, she moves her hand to a rock behind her. She grasps the weapon. Then smash! She has crushed the head of the rattler as the man jumps to his feet and realizes her fortitude and wisdom.

Thus, great troubles or obstacles do not scare her as much as little ones. For deep inside her she has the power of Mars, which gives her strength in conflict when necessary. In other words, she would not become frantic when confronted by a brute of a man, but is apt to go to pieces when a mouse runs under her bed. And she will worry more about the cut on the finger of the man she loves than about his losing his job. Strange girl, this Scorpio—she must come down from a generation of queens.

She is at her worst when she gets any illusions of grandeur which result in her believing other people inferior. From early childhood, she must force herself to like people for their good qualities and not pay so much attention to their negative ones. There is always a tendency on her part to look down on others. Only a genuine spirit of sportsmanship and justice will save her from condemnation. In conversation, she must watch that

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Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Street & Smith's Romantic Range, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York, County of New York (*ss.*)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. W. Ralston, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Romantic Range, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations to wit:

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H. W. RALSTON, Vice President.
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

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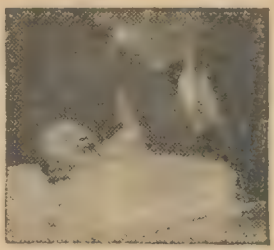

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SAVE FOR A HOME! A house of your own, a garden to dig in, room-to-grow for the children—every man and his wife want that. Houses are hard to get, now. Why not save for *your* house—while the saving's good?

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A United States war message prepared by the War Advertising Council; approved by the Office of War Information; and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

critical tongue and the desire to talk about herself. When she learns tact and co-operation, she quickly becomes a leader, for she does have a royal personality. A wise queen can be just as popular as a commoner when she desires to serve rather than to command. Every Scorpio girl should let the other person be heard.

And in courtship, she should not tell the man about herself or her troubles the moment she meets him, but rather ask him about himself. He'll give her plenty of time to talk about herself later. She can hold her man only when she shows more interest in him than in herself. And it is so easy, too, if she will only try. But so many Scorpio girls become unpopular simply because they haven't learned that lesson of humility. Vanity is their worst opponent.

She should be in open spaces as much as possible. To be confined is dangerous for it leads to self-pity. Looking at nature such as the stars, the hills and the forests, does not kindle vanity which arises from too much attention to a mirror. For it is true, the less the Scorpio girl sees or thinks of herself, the more she develops personality. She should have some activity or interest which concerns public welfare. Other people's troubles will prevent her own, and in helping others she helps herself.

Co-operation is an absolute necessity for the success of the Scorpio girl. When you hear of a Scorpio being divorced, then it is ten to one that the reason was lack of co-operation, constant refusal to meet her husband halfway, always finding some reason not to go out when he wanted to go out, or playing sick when some affair came up which both should attend.

And the Scorpio girl has such wonderful opportunities for expression and development. She is usually lucky in worldly goods, but it is so hard for her to appreciate what she has. Statistics show that Scorpios have more wealth and worldly goods than others, still less happiness, for the simple reason they don't know how to be content. They must adjust themselves early in life and try to enjoy life and love in making others happy. Actually, it is merely a matter of understanding true values and realizing there is no perfection in the world. This advice is the best the Scorpio girl can get, "Love your man for the good that is in him, and by concentrating on the good, it will grow even better. The more you point to weak things, the stronger they become. So keep the negative things in the dark, and put the focus on the positive ones. Good breaks come to those who think about the good ones and don't fear the bad ones."

And last but not least, Scorpio, try being cheerful the next time the man you love calls. Talk about nothing but the good things that have happened since you last saw him. When the Scorpio girl can kick gloom out the window, she finds a new sunshine that reflects love and friendship to her and gives her her place in the sun where she

belongs. No man can resist the Scorpio-Number 11 girl who is enthusiastic and appreciative. It does wonders to a man's heart, for after all, that is what he wants from his girl—vitality and spontaneity which lifts him up and inspires him. Scorpio, your true happiness rests with you, not with your man. Open your arms to him. Give, Scorpio, give—don't reach to take. And remember that the true elixir of love is the wine of sunshine, not the whine of a shadow frightened maiden.

Oh, Scorpio, you have such power
To get the fullness of each hour,
If you in turn will only bring
Appreciation, not a sting.
There may be thorns near every rose,
But one who's clever always knows,
The rose is greater than the thorn,
So thank the Lord the rose was born.

THE SCORPIO-NUMBER 11 MAN

The Scorpio man is one of feeling, wisdom and leadership, but not so much of the emotional or dramatic as of the calculating. In fact, a typical Scorpio leader is Chiang Kai-shek. And he is one who needs a strong feminine partner. Admiral Stark is also a Scorpio who demonstrates the true power of his star and number.

Stability of purpose is a Scorpio quality. And such a man has great idealistic strength which considers hunches and dreams as well as cold logic. Thus, he has to guard against emotion which at times can damage him. The woman he loves

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must not appeal to him just as a woman or thing of beauty. She must be an inspirational force that brings out the best in him.

So the Scorpio man must be constantly on guard that he doesn't pick the wrong kind of mate. If he marries simply because he is attracted by a woman's beauty, he can never accomplish the dreams of his heart. If every Scorpio will remember that, his later years of life will be great. It doesn't mean that his wife should be homely or that every pretty girl is a bad influence. Beauty of heart can accompany good or bad looks. The thing a Scorpio must consider is that beauty and strength of heart. In other words, marry for character, not appearances. If she is lovely to look at, so much the better, but what the world sees about a great wife is ability, stout heart and wisdom of womanhood.

The Scorpio man may have a tendency of selfishness, but it is a selfishness for the purpose of accomplishing things of benefit to others as well as himself. He is a good provider and he is affectionate though not demonstrative. He doesn't like to exhibit emotions of any kind in public, and doesn't like to tell what he thinks, although he will talk about himself when asked.

He has great patience. In fact, he can overdo it and let it run into procrastination if he isn't careful. That is because he likes to be sure of conditions. He is not likely to propose marriage until he is quite certain the answer will be "yes." There is a strong sense of pride in his make-up, and he cannot stand to have his wife criticize him, especially in public. That's one way to lose a Scorpio husband.

In speech he is blunt and forceful, sometimes sarcastic. And he usually is sure of his facts. He doesn't make boasts like a Hitler or Mussolini and seldom do you find him in a position where he has to eat crow for something he said. He is not likely to tell a girl he loves her when he knows he doesn't. And, likewise, he shies away from a girl who wears her love on her sleeve. If he hears his girl saying the same nice things to another man as she says to him, he will drop her. One way to hold him is to keep a pet name for him which is never used for another. He has such a strong sense of possession that he can't share affection. Even his own children must not have too much love from the mother. He must be given his own place and affection. He makes a good father, but not a too companionable one. His children must be disciplined, and often he carries that discipline to his wife. He is what might be called the old-type father, not the modern pal whose children call him by his first name.

His sense of justice is strong, and like the Scorpio girl, he is powerful in emergency. The calmest Scorpio, under normal conditions, can become a savage killer when someone attacks his loved one. When aroused, he does not calm down quickly. He seldom forgets or even forgives a hurt. A woman who double-crosses him becomes

his enemy for life. He may never do anything to bring vengeance, but there are no kind thoughts ever sent to her even when she might be dying.

The Scorpio is an upholder of the law. He makes a fine judge or police official. He will condemn his own son to jail if the boy is guilty, although afterward he will do everything in his power to help the lad. He does not turn against a friend who falls by the wayside as long as that friend has not sinned against him. But he expects that friend to pay all penalties. It is hard to make him put expediency above fair play.

He does see the dark side of things, however, and like the Scorpio girl, he brings many shadows to himself just by expecting them. He should strain for more enthusiasm than is born with him, especially in his attitude toward the woman he loves. After all, every girl likes fervor as well as deep love and it never hurts the Scorpio man to pour on the nice words and demonstrative action, even if he thinks it foolish.

He can take a lot of punishment before rebelling, as there is nothing cowardly in his make-up. He can stand a blow to his face more so than to his feelings. It is wise for the sweetheart of a Scorpio man never to say anything in a quarrel. If she simply acts hurt, he will be more easily influenced. Tears will get him more so than temper.

Seldom does he lack for talent. He often indicates his feelings for

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a woman by creating something of a romantic nature rather than by speaking of love. He will resort to a love poem or a handmade gift or a drawing, for it is easier for him to express himself in things. And when he brings a gift, the girl must show appreciation. He might tend to dismiss her demonstration of thanks, but had she not done it, he would have been hurt. And he can say nicer things about her when she is not present than to her face. He is good at writing love letters.

On the whole, he is an unusual person, being above the mob than of it. He expects the girl to reach up to him and not take him because he needs her. He wants to feel that he is helping her. Still, in his heart, he knows he couldn't do without her. But never expect him to admit it. He has the boss complex, but can be a very nice boss if she will cooperate with him and let him think he is the boss. Thus, tact in handling him will pay dividends.

No woman who has to have a Prince Charming of honied words should marry a Scorpio, however, for no matter how much he loves, he is not an enthusiast. Still, his love will be lasting and his affection constant. In other words, he wears well. That, after all, is an asset to a woman.

He belongs in the intellectual group and should never marry a woman who can't climb with him. He has the capacity for knowledge, so it is not wise for a girl to keep anything from him. He will learn it sooner or later, so she might as well tell him and depend on his sense of justice. All he has to be assured of, is that the girl has learned her lesson.

There is pioneer instinct in him, and courage to meet the adversary. Mars keeps him safe from defeatism. And it is safe to say that no Scorpio, no matter how unsuccessful he might be today, will not become successful if he marries the right woman. He is so creative and talented, that all he needs is a mate to inspire him, and the future is assured. He was born to climb. If he doesn't get there, it is because some woman has held him back. He has all the other natural requirements. He has to find his queen himself, in order to reach his kingdom. But he can fail, if he doesn't appreciate his queen and looks for another.

The Scorpio man with Mars above
Must fight his way to find his love.
And once he wins the perfect mate
And one he can appreciate,
Then Lady Luck soon comes along
And makes him happy, wise and strong.
For it is true—no Scorpio
Can live alone and ever grow.

THE END.

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